

Iron Man springs poetic surprise after a doomed love

Since the poet Sylvia Plath's suicide 35 years ago, her husband Ted Hughes, the Poet Laureate, has remained largely silent on the subject. The publication of 88 poems to her, almost all of them new to his readers, has created a sensation.

The literary world has received two great surprises with the publication of Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*. One is the revelation of their existence, the other manner of their expression. Since the day in February 1963 that Sylvia Plath sealed her children Frieda and Nicholas inside their bedroom, went to the kitchen and laid her head in the gas oven, a generation has grown up entranced by the doomed affair between two of the world's finest post-war poets, and keen to know more about Hughes's part in Plath's demise.

A rain of abuse, hatred and suspicion from Plath fans and feminist critics has harried Hughes for more than 30 years. Literary editors have grown accustomed to

BY JOHN WALSH

receiving mad mimeographed newsletters from Plath fanatics on American campuses accusing the Yorkshire poet of hooliganism and blame for her death. Cries of "Murderer!" accompanied his poetry-reading visits to British universities in the seventies and eighties. His response has been mostly silence and passivity: he has confronted literary journalists and would-be biographers of Plath over details of fact, without volunteering any new information of his own. And his family have proved adept at seeing off intrusive enquiries. When Anne Stevenson was writing a life of Plath in 1990, she was "assisted" in her analysis of Hughes's behaviour by the intrusions of his formidable sister Olwyn.

Nobody expected Hughes to do what he has done. Confession was more his late wife's thing. Hughes was *The Iron Man* (the title of his famous children's book), impervious to criticism, aloof and unbending. Now, with *Birthday Letters*, he has confounded the critics who charge him with lack of feeling, and has simultaneously reclaimed Plath as a breathing, vivid, passionate woman rather than a Nazi-obsessed victim who killed herself because her man



Sylvia Plath, late wife of Ted Hughes, the Poet Laureate, and the unexpected subject of his latest collection *Birthday Letters*

Photograph: Rollie McKenna/Faber & Faber

had left her for another woman. There is no trace of calculation about these poems, no suggestion he is putting any record straight.

You can hear Hughes smiling his thin, wolfish smile as he explains to the dead Sylvia how things were meant to be. It's this tone of charm mingled with awe that characterises the extraordinary idiom of *Birthday Letters*, as they tack constantly between banal confession and rapt epiphany. It was his feral qualities, as much as his poetic genius, that attracted her to him at the start, and - appropriately for a man who writes with an insider's empathy about the savage natural world and whose most famous col-

lection, until now, was *Crow* - a curious whiff of animal physicality hangs over their initial convergence in Falcon Yard. It was a party to celebrate the publication of the *St Botolph's Review*, a literary magazine, Hughes arrived with a woman in tow, and recalls a scene of turbulence: "Girl-friend like a loaded crossbow. The sound-waves/fanned and torn by Jon Lyde's Juzz. The half-like the tilting deck of the Titanic." We know from Plath's own journals how things proceeded between them, a memory of passion so violent it seems to come from somewhere quite different from a mild Cambridge winter evening in 1956: "and then he kissed me bang smash on the mouth

and ripped my hairband off, my lovely red hairband scarf ... and my favourite silver earrings; hah, I shall keep, he harked. And when he kissed my neck, I bit him long and hard on the cheek ..." In *Birthday Letters*, Hughes remembers how infatuated his escort had been by his fascination for Sylvia, remembers staring at Sylvia's heart that he had pocketed (blue, in his recollection) and corroborates that she did indeed bite him so hard on the cheek it left a "ring-motif of tooth-marks" that would brand him for ever.

It was, clearly, quite an evening. And as its centre is a memory of his first sighting of Sylvia, a memory that flirts with

pathos, teeters towards soft-focus romanticism without ever quite misting the lens up. Hughes itemises Plath - as she once itemised her body in "Lady Lazarus" and found nothing at all at the core - and puts her back together: legs, hands, "monkey-elegant fingers", hair, mouth, eyes like "a crush of diamonds". This litany of features is both objective and subjective at the same time, a scrutiny that's infused with helpless love and artless simplicity:

"I see you there, clearer, more real
Than in any of the years in its shadow.
As if I saw you that once, then never again."

Reading Hughes, you learn to look

again and again at Plath's remarkable face, so blandly pretty in photographs, just as her letters home to her mother reveal nothing of the brain-stewng angst that was driving her towards self-destruction. Hughes harps on about her vast aboriginal lips, her fleshy boxer's nose, her rubbery face and brown eyes like Prussian elves. He also, with an eye to future developments, refers to the scar that marked her first suicide attempt in 1943 when she was 20. Reading this long, unfolding, detailed picture-perfect memory of lost love, you're not aware of a war going on between two impossible mercurial people - but of a gradual realisation that to love Plath was to embark on a stormy ocean that could sink both of them. "I had no idea," writes Hughes, "how I was becoming necessary." Suicide hung in the air, it seemed, from the outset. Hughes, in love, simply ignored the warning signs that hung round his immorality.

The fascination of this collection is the feeling of drawing near a mystery, or collection of mysteries. Was Plath so mentally unbalanced, so chronically suicidal, that her encounter with the gas oven in 1963 was a death foretold in many of her poems?

Did Ted Hughes's desertion tip her over the edge? Did her obsession with her father, Otto, lie behind her final withdrawal from the world? (In one spectacularly telling moment, Hughes remembers making Sylvia a writing table from an elm plank. "I did not know," he writes, "I had made and fitted a door/Opening downwards into your Daddy's grave".) Could two supremely gifted poets live together without one of them sucking the talent, and therefore the life, out of the other. And is it part of the poetic vocation to pick and worry at one's psychic scars until they turn septic and poison you? Sylvia Plath remains an enigma because of the dislocation between the real-life woman we think we know, and the bitter, devastating black comedian of the late poems. But thanks to Hughes, we now have Plath the charmer, the love object and the Jamesian American-girl-in-Europe, sharing the stage, so to speak, with the desolate solitary, the dangerous cheek-biter, Joanna Panier. Three and a half decades seems to become truncated as he brings her to life, with her suicide scar and her unique air of "raving exhilaration" both intact.

The fact that Ted Hughes should have been doing this, quietly and unrevealed, over the 35 years since her death, is a cause for celebration. The manner of his doing it, in calm, unburdened notations of shattering detail, for future generations even less poetical than this one to read and understand, is a cause for tears.

Birthday Letters, by Ted Hughes, is published by Faber & Faber (£14.99)

Mere machines may calculate your chances of landing that computer job

Not content with taking over work, computers are now automating the process of selecting human employees. Charles Arthur, Science Editor, on how machines are making choices that change our lives.

When a new cable channel advertised for production staff, it expected to get a few hundred replies. Instead it received 5,000 CVs. Within days the four people whittling them down to "only 120" were so desperate to find some unusual characteristic that they began choosing people whose names could be found in Boney M songs.

"It was immensely painful," said Debbie Mason, a founding director of Rapture TV in Norwich. While smaller companies are struggling with a blizzard of

applications, larger ones are turning to computers, meaning many letters are never reviewed by people before being rejected. Alan Whitford, managing director of the UK subsidiary of Resumix, one of two main rivals in this field, said: "We use artificial-intelligence systems which can search for 'skills' - which might be defined as geographical, educational or work experience - and test those against 'rules'."

The result is that a shortlist of any size can be drawn up from any number of applications. Although such systems have been used in the US for a decade, they have only arrived in the UK in the past couple of years, though they are used by the BBC, British Airways and British Telecom, which employ a computing package from a US company called Resumix.

"Ours is the only product that safely considers every word in a candidate's CV," said Greg

Mancusi, marketing director of Resumix. It does this by indexing every word in the CV and ranking it against the recruiter's standards.

However, Mr Whitford said such word-based systems "don't find people they ought to find. You might not write down that you have leadership skills, but it would be clear from the context. Our system will find that."

Both systems could be flummoxed, though, by a CV which said the applicant led a life "searching for leadership, and managed somehow to keep out of department stores", because it contains key words - leadership, managed, and department.

Under the Data Protection Bill, which should become law later this year, anyone who suspects their application has been rejected by a machine will have the right to have it re-examined by a person. But it is not clear whether recruiting companies

will have to inform people they use such machines.

While the systems might be effective in weighing up applicants for jobs which require a narrow set of skills - such as a particular computer system, accounts experience and more than one language - it is unclear how they would do in sorting through the letters that come in from people seeking creative jobs.

Rapture TV's ad said it was a "revolutionary new cable TV channel for teenagers" and was looking for "bright, dynamic and energetic people" with "many years broadcast experience or ... a media studies degree."

Asked how Resumix would cope with that, Mr Mancusi said: "The idea is to determine which CVs you want to spend more time with. So you are going to look for hard skills - looking for key words such as camera operating, video formats ... Our product would then rank every CV in order."

Flight offer: Europe from £34 return including tax

The Independent and Independent on Sunday, in association with easyJet are offering readers the chance to fly to Europe from an incredible £34 return or £22 one way (all prices include airport tax).

This offer is available between 21 February and 4 September 1998. Choices from Barcelona, Nice, Amsterdam, Geneva or Palma and in Scotland, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen or Inverness. Flights to all destinations are from London Luton, while you can also travel to Nice and Amsterdam from Liverpool airport as well.

If you live in Scotland you can fly from any of the Scottish airports mentioned above, to Lon-

don Luton from £34 return including airport tax.

The prices for travel are divided into three bands - travel between February 21st and March 28th are Band A, while travel between March 29th and September 4th is divided into peak, (Band C) and off peak (Band B). If you want to travel off peak, then use the grid to advise you of the best times to fly.

The price grid (in tomorrow's paper) shows the cost of a one way flight to each destination. If you choose to travel to a particular destination in band A, then you may find it is a different price to bands B or C.

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Record damages for man framed by police squad



George Lewis, who is to receive £200,000 compensation

Photograph: Sean Page

A man who served five years in prison for an offence he did not commit will receive record damages from police today. Officers from the now disbanded and discredited West Midlands Police Serious Crime Squad had invented his confessions. Michael Streeter, Legal Affairs Correspondent, looks at a clear case of police corruption.

George Lewis will receive £200,000 in an agreed settlement with the force today, one of the highest compensation pay-outs for police malpractice.

It is almost certainly the largest sum in damages since a Court of Appeal guidance earlier last year limiting the level of such awards.

The scale of the settlement, which will be announced at the

High Court in Birmingham this morning, reflects the gravity of a case in which a young man was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment after detectives invented a confession.

Mr Lewis, now 31, said: "I'm very happy that [the force] have admitted liability. That is more important than the financial settlement."

His only "crime" had been to go to a West Midlands police station, almost exactly 10 years ago, to collect his stolen car.

He was arrested twice, racially and physically abused, then informed by two detectives from the squad that while in a police car he had already "confessed" to committing a robbery.

One of the officers, Detective Constable John Perkins, who has since died, was one of those implicated in the false confessions which led to the Carl Bridgewater murder miscarriage of justice in the Seventies.

Mr Lewis was refused access to a lawyer and after being threatened with a syringe and

a small bottle to make him talk, he signed blank pages of interview notes.

A "confession" to a burglary and two robberies were later fabricated by officers.

When he asked an inspector why he was being treated in this way, he was told it was because he had "fucked" the detectives around.

Despite later complaints of his treatment, made through a solicitor, Mr Lewis was convicted in June 1987 for the three offences and given a 10-year jail sentence; he was also told he had no grounds for appeal. Eventually, after a five-year battle, his case was referred to the Court of Appeal, which ordered a retrial; but he remained in custody until the prosecution offered no evidence in July 1992.

Five years ago Mr Lewis, who has suffered psychiatric problems, began civil action against the police but it was only last November that the force said that they were no longer contesting the case. The Bridgewater appeal revealed that Perkins had faced 23 other allegations of making up evidence.

The squad was disbanded in 1989 amid widespread allegations that detectives fabricated confessions.

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The court quashed the convictions of more than 20 men, some serving long jail sentences, who had been convicted on the basis of squad evidence.

Despite a marathon inquiry, no detectives were ever convicted of criminal offences.

Other officers involved in the Lewis case have since retired without disciplinary hearings.

Last Thursday the Home Affairs Select Committee recommended big changes to procedures to ensure quicker and more effective disciplining of corrupt officers.

Mr Lewis is said to be still "full of anger" at his treatment, at the time it was taken, to clear his name and at the lack of punishment for the guilty officers.

His solicitor, Tony Evans, said: "He has struggled for more than 10 years to clear his name."

Last February the Court of Appeal moved to reduce the level of "exemplary" damages awarded by juries in police misconduct cases to around £25,000 or less in most instances.

● A black couple who reported a violent arrest by police in Stoke Newington, north-east London, and who were then themselves arrested, abused and accused of assaulting and obstructing police will receive substantial damages from the Metropolitan Police in a court settlement today.

Police break heroin gang

Police have broken a drugs gang believed to have been importing almost all the heroin brought into Britain.

The gang is believed to have dumped up to 100kg of heroin — worth £20m — on to streets across the country every week.

It was brought in from Turkey and passed through what police described as a "clearing house" in north London before being distributed to smaller dealers.

After two raids on houses in north and east London, 14 men have been arrested and around £5m of heroin recovered.

Detective Chief Inspector John Shatford, heading the operation, said the raids would severely disrupt the flow of heroin into the UK. "We believe that all the heroin coming into this country goes to this gang in north London which acts as a clearing house," he said. "It is difficult to imagine a more significant seizure and we are all very pleased."

A spokeswoman for Scotland Yard said the year-long operation to track down the rest of the gang, which includes a number of Turkish nationals who used the local Turkish community as a cover for their activities, would continue.

— Kate Watson-Smyth

Animal-rights arrests

Detectives were yesterday examining incendiary devices thought to belong to animal-rights activists.

The devices and associated materials were seized from a car stopped by police in Northampton yesterday.

Two men in their thirties are being questioned and the officer heading the investigation described the discovery as a "very significant find related to animal-rights activity".

A police spokeswoman said officers stopped and searched a red Vauxhall Cavalier following a police operation in Camp Hill, Northampton, shortly before 4pm on Saturday. "Two men ... one of them from London and the other from the Northampton area — were inside the car at the time. Both were arrested at the scene."

Boy, aged 9, found hanged

A nine-year-old schoolboy was found hanged by his own dressing gown cord in a bedroom of his home, police said last night.

Dale Clough was found hanging from a top bunk in a flat in Stonehouse, Plymouth. Neighbours believe the boy was found late on Saturday night, by his brother Daryl, seven, who alerted his parents. Karen Clough, 27, and Wayne Harford, 32, who also have five-month-old twin daughters, Kacey and Debbie.

A spokesman for Devon and Cornwall Police stressed: "This is not a suicide, it is not a game, purely a tragic accident."

National Lottery winners

Four ticket-holders, including two family syndicates, shared £15.8m in the National Lottery roll-over jackpot draw on Saturday. The winning numbers were 14, 31, 33, 38, 46 and 48. The bonus ball was 26.

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Move to reduce alcohol limit in drive to cut road deaths

Drinking and driving claims the lives of more than 500 people every year. Randeep Ramesh and Jeremy Riggall examine the measures ministers are considering to cut the death toll on Britain's roads.

The Government is to launch a consultation paper at the end of this month which will propose a lower drink-driving limit and set out radical measures to deter motorists from drinking and driving.

Ministers favour a blood alcohol limit of 50 milligrams of alcohol per 100 millilitres of blood - down from the present 80mg limit. It will be the first reduction in 30 years. The year-long driving ban is likely to stay.

Any reduction is unlikely to produce a backlash. A recent poll by ICM showed 85 per cent of the public backed a lowering of the limit.

Although Britain is recognised as having an effective road safety policy, officials say the number of deaths caused by drink-driving has remained static at 540 a year for four years. In order to cut further the death toll, ministers are minded to consider tougher penalties for high-risk or repeat offenders. These measures may see persistent offenders losing their licences for life or extend the mandatory 12-month driving ban. Another option could see motorists who ignore the drink-driving limit forfeiting their car.

Young drivers may also face tougher drink drive limits. Officials point out although "early" drivers only make up 10 per cent of the driving population,

they cause 20 per cent of accidents. In some US states, the number of fatalities caused by young drivers dropped by 50 per cent after introducing "super-low" limits for teenagers.

Ministers, however, have been advised that a limit of 20mg for motorists with less than three years' driving experience may not significantly cut accident rates. Civil servants say creating a two-tier system may just result in young drivers drinking more after they pass a certain date.

Motoring organisations are not in favour of tougher drink drive limits. "We think more police enforcement of the current limits would significantly bring down levels," said a spokesman for the AA.

But evidence suggests otherwise. Experts say that having 50mg of alcohol in 100ml of blood makes a driver twice as likely to have an accident as a motorist with a zero reading. Researchers at the University of Leeds have shown that despite being under the current limit, motorists' driving can be affected. "There are small but consistent detriments to driving even under 80mg," said Andrew Parks, principal research fellow.

Richard Allsop, professor of transport studies at University College, London, estimates that 100 lives a year could be saved if the 50mg limit was adopted. Random breath testing by the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions showed 2.3 per cent of drivers could be driving with alcohol levels between 40mg and 80mg.

A lower limit will bring Britain in line with the rest of Europe. France, Belgium, Greece and the Netherlands all have a 50mg limit. Sweden has the lowest

drink-driving laws, set at 20mg in 1990. "From January to the end of October we carried out 12,000 alcohol tests and found only 90 to be above 20mg, which works out at 0.75 per cent," said inspector Glenn Anderson of Stockholm police.

With twice as many road deaths as Britain, France lowered its limit to 50mg in 1995 and introduced campaigns to inform people how much they could drink. Disposable breathalysers were put on sale in service stations, supermarkets and chemists. Initial reports claim this has saved lives.

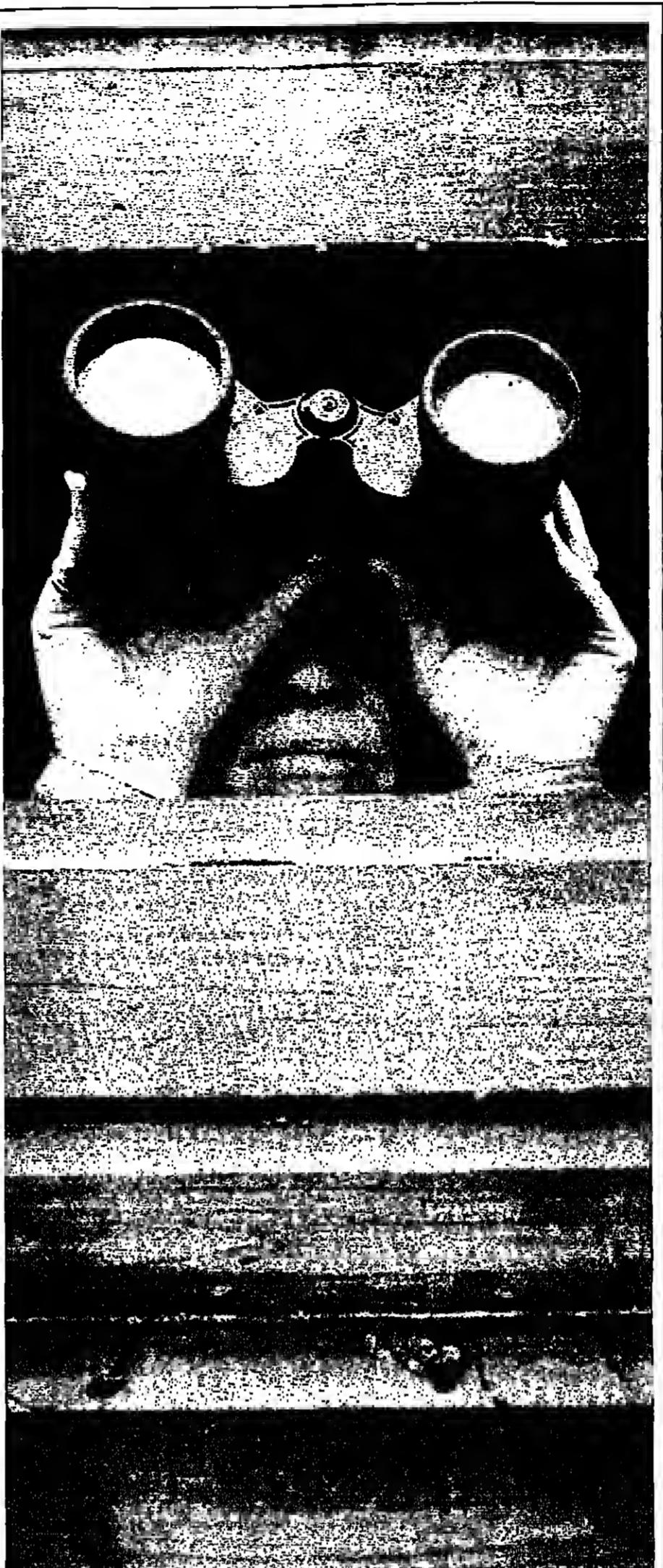
Paul Dumontet, spokesman for the transport department in France, says that having a glass or two with a meal is *de rigueur* for the French. "We have to be realistic. The French like to drink wine at lunch time. We are simply trying what the safe driving alcohol level is."

British ministers believe the problem with countries such as Belgium and France is not the limit, but the very light penalties.

At Westminster, ministers are keen to promote a package of measures. Reducing the alcohol limit has to go hand in hand with enforcement to get results. When politicians in the Capital Territory of Australia reduced the limit from 80mg to 50mg they also introduced random breath testing, and there was a 41 per cent reduction in offenders who were three times over the limit.

"We aim to cut the number of deaths on Britain's roads significantly," said Baroness Hayman last week. "But we will do so with a balanced package.

There are many weapons in the armoury. But it will be through education first, then compliance, enforcement and finally legislation that we bring about change."



Waiting game: Twitchers taking advantage of the 'Big Bird Watch' yesterday at Doncaster's Potteric Carr Nature Reserve in South Yorkshire. Photograph: Steve Forrest

COST OF EXCEEDING THE LIMIT

Country	Limit	Minimum Penalty	Road deaths per 10,000 motor vehicles
Sweden	20mg*	3 months disqualification	1.3
Victoria (Australia)	50mg*	6 months disqualification	1.45
Netherlands	50mg	6 months disqualification	1.8
Maryland (US)	70mg	60 days disqualification	1.83
Great Britain	80mg	12 months disqualification	1.5
France	80mg**	900FF fine and endorsement	3.0

* Enforcement by random breath testing
** France has recently reduced the limit to 50mg
Source: The Potters Group July 1997

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Plea to Irvine over legal aid for breast implant woman

British plastic surgeons have written to the Lord Chancellor complaining about legal aid being given to a woman who says her baby suffered as a result of her being given a silicone breast implant. The British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons say there is no medical proof that silicone makes people ill.

It wants the Lord Chancellor, Lord Irvine of Lairg, to reconsider the decision to allow Mary Bowler limited legal aid to look at the possibility of suing the manufacturers.

We hope that the scientific and legal communities in the UK will be alerted to the threat junk science imposes on society and will move quickly to control it.

They warn that the ultimate consequence may be a shortage of devices such as pacemakers and artificial joints.

The letter is signed by Bradford University's Professor David Sharp, the president of the association, and four American and Canadian experts in the field.

About 5,000 women in the UK have breast implants every year, 3,000 of them with silicone gel implants. Up to 40 per cent of operations come after a mastectomy and the rest are cosmetic.

It continues: "It is appalling that the people responsible for this decision did not ask whether there is any evidence ...

DAILY POEM

Reconfirming Light

By Matthew Sweeney
for Tom Lynch

On Mullett Lake in mid-March
two pickups are parked by blue ice-shanties.
Fishermen are inside. Perch
and walleye are what they're after
through their holes in the ice, although
a week, two weeks from now is best,
right before the ice melts and thermal
inversion sends the fish wild.
And shanties and pickups go under.

Down there, deep, cruise the sturgeon,
big as torpedoes. They're never seen
except when they lounge on the top
to reconfirm light, or when a hook
snags one and a boat's tugged in circles.
Slowly though. There are worse catches –
corpses that lie on the bottom all winter
then float up to be towed in,
wearing clothes a size too small for them.

This is our final Daily Poem from the volumes shortlisted for the 1997 T S Eliot Prize, presented by the Poetry Book Society. The award will be made at the British Library this evening. "Reconfirming Light" comes from *The Bridal Suite* (Cape, £7). © Matthew Sweeney.

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No 10

Saddam steps up pressure on UN with call to arms

Iraq turned up the volume in the war of words over United Nations arms inspectors yesterday. It called up a million Iraqis for weapons training, and warned it would cease all co-operation with the UN. But both sides are still fencing, says Andrew Marshall.

Iraq's Vice-President, Taha Yassin Ramadan, said 1 million Iraqis would take part in weapons training starting next month as part of a *jihad* (holy war) to end UN sanctions on their country. "We are determined [to carry out] a great *jihad* to lift the sanctions," Mr Ramadan said. "There is no alternative to this after seven years of patience and co-operation with the United Nations and its committees."

Saddam Hussein had urged mobilising the Iraqi people on Saturday night in comments to leaders of the ruling Baath Party, saying that "the Americans are continuing to harm our people, which requires a new method of response".

Speaking on the seventh anniversary of the outbreak of the 1991 Gulf War, the Iraqi President said the country faced a continuing military threat from the United States and called for volunteers. "We should show an essential part of the people's determination under the leadership of the great Baath [Party] to fight in order that Iraq exists and remains as it should be," he said.

"Although we are in the eighth year [since the war] our enemies, the enemies of God

and humanity – America and Zionism – are still continuing their evil work and searching for any thread of hope to fulfil their wicked goals," President Saddam said.

He warned the US against using military force to resolve the dispute over UN weapons inspections in Iraq, which flared again last week when an American-led team was barred. And he threatened to carry out a recommendation by Iraq's parliament which gave the UN weapons inspectors a May deadline to complete their work.

Defence Secretary George Robertson said he still hoped for a diplomatic solution to the crisis: "I think we are likely to hear a lot of noise but hopefully a diplomatic solution will be found," he told BBC television.

Britain on Friday sent the aircraft carrier *Invincible* to the Gulf. But Mr Robertson declined to be drawn on the possible use of force by the US and Britain, saying it was a last resort.

The confrontation – a repetition of events late last year – is still in its early stages. The weekend's eruptions seemed timed to coincide with the visit to Baghdad today of the UN's chief arms inspector Richard Butler, who heads the United Nations Special Commission (Unscom) charged with dismantling Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

America has only one close supporter on the UN Security Council: Britain. France, Russia and China have all distanced themselves from the US stance, and sought ways around the problem. During last year's confrontation, violence was averted when Russia brokered a deal that seemed to offer Saddam a way out of sanctions.

Patriot game: Iraqi women answer President Saddam's call-to-arms yesterday. They are due to start weapons training next month. Photograph: AP

Iraqi envoy and seven others murdered in Jordan

Iraq's chargé d'affaires in Jordan and seven other people, including his wife, were stabbed to death in Amman early yesterday. The identity of the attackers and their motive is not known. Patrick Cockburn reports on the increasingly violent relations between Jordan and Iraq.

The Iraqi diplomat, Hikmat al-Hajou, the chargé at the Iraqi embassy in Amman, was killed with his Egyptian-born wife, a number of Iraqi businessmen and an Egyptian bodyguard in a wealthy suburb of the Jordanian capital early yesterday morning. First reports said they were stabbed. A woman who survived is being treated for knife wounds.

The identity of the attackers is not known, although the survivor said there were four or five and they spoke Arabic with Iraqi accents. The Iraqi foreign ministry condemned the

"treacherous crime carried out last night in Amman." It said it was sending a diplomat and a general from the security forces to Amman to investigate.

The murders come after violent incidents which have led to tension between Amman and Baghdad. Last month Iraqi security intercepted a letter from Jordan to Maj-Gen Talib al-Sadoun, one of the Iraqi military establishment, which it saw as evidence of a plot. In retribution President Saddam Hussein executed four Jordanian students under arrest in Iraq for small-scale smuggling. On 3

January shots were fired at an Iraqi diplomat in Amman but he was not hit.

Mr Hajou served in Kuwait just before the Iraqi invasion in 1990, where he worked also for the mukhabarat, the Iraqi general intelligence service. More recently the regime is said to have had doubts about his loyalty. Jordanian officials were eager to portray the killings as an inter-Iraqi feud.

Nevertheless, Iraqi business has not provoked such savage killings in the past. It is not inconceivable that Iraqi security itself might have acted against Mr Hajou.

The murders appear to be part of a trend for diplomatic friction between Iraq and Jordan, once close allies, to turn to violence.

Algeria 'terror' talks

Algeria will take a tough stand in talks with a European Union delegation arriving today, focusing on ways to confront "terrorism" and repeating its demand that European countries crack down on Muslim militants.

Western and Algerian political analysts in the capital Algiers said at the weekend that the Algerian government will insist that it faces "terrorist" acts of violence rather than a political crisis.

It will also tell its visitors it does not need humanitarian aid for victims of a recent wave of massacres in which some 1,100 civilians have been killed in less than three weeks.

"The authorities will argue that the political crisis has long been resolved with the election of a president, a parliament and local councils," one Western analyst said.

Algeria agreed to the EU mission in a rare display of willingness to discuss the bloodshed. But it has rejected any attempts to interfere in its internal affairs and any inquiry into the massacres.

Algeria plunged into civil strife after the authorities in January 1992 cancelled a general election which the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was poised to win. More than 65,000 people have since been killed. Most of the attacks on civilians have been blamed by officials and Algerian media on the radical Armed Islamic Group (GIA).

The EU delegation includes junior foreign ministers from the so-called *troika* – Luxembourg, Britain and Austria.

— Reuters, Algiers



Green belt protests grow

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Mysterious force for jobless rattles Jospin's coalition

French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin will make further concessions this week to a protest movement for the unemployed which has arisen from nowhere to shake his coalition government. Around 10,000 people, mostly leftist sympathisers, marched through Paris on Saturday to demand improved benefits for the long-term jobless. Why has such a limited movement been so effective? John Lichfield reports from the French capital.

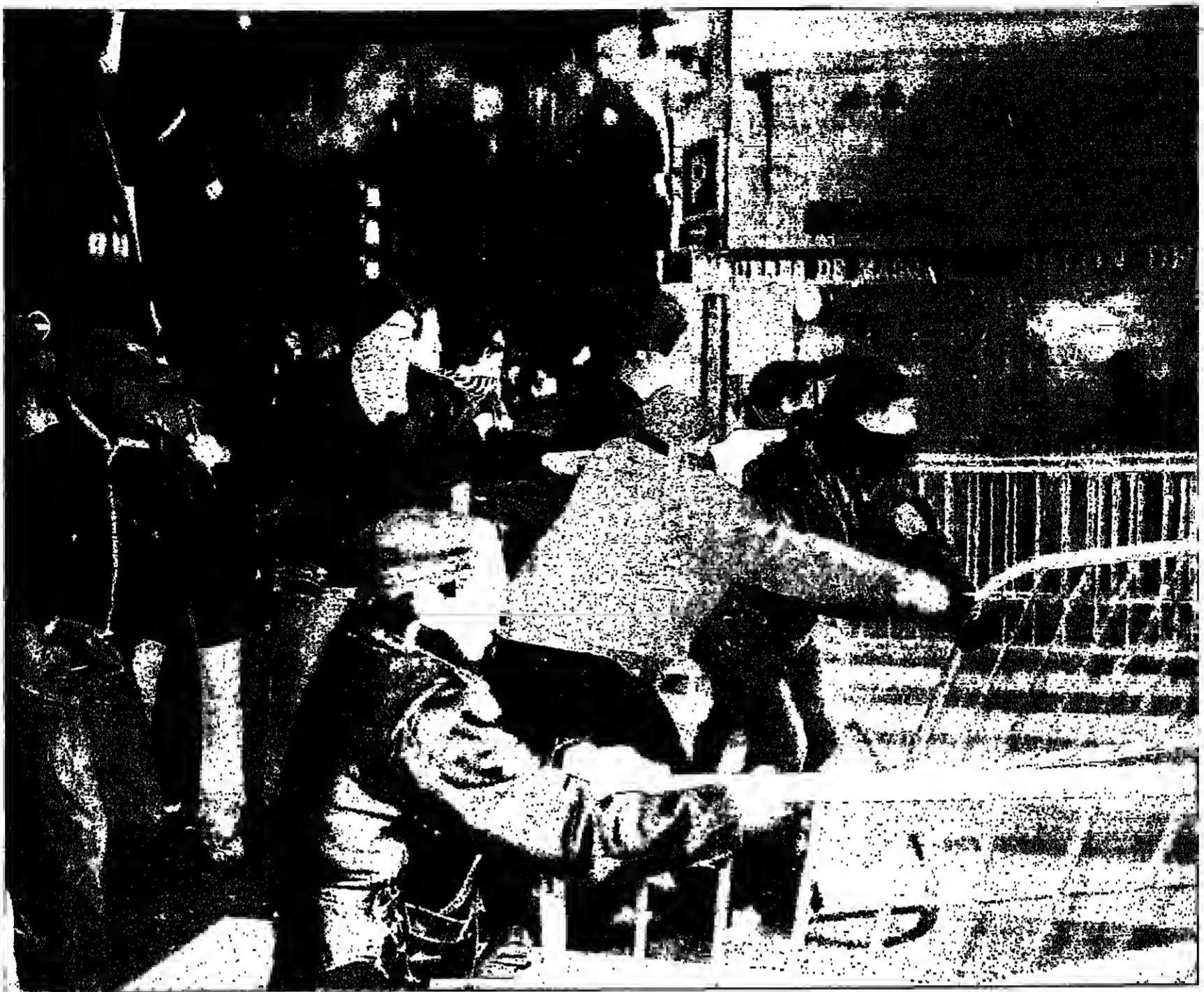
Anne Michel was in a minority in Saturday's march for the jobless: she was, herself, unemployed. A bilingual secretary, rejected because she is "too old" at 51, she lives in one room in Paris on £75 a week in benefits. She was attending her first ever demonstration.

"There are 7 million people like me in France, trying to live on minimum benefits which are below the level of poverty. That is the real France," Ms Michel said. "Of all the demonstrations there have been in France in recent years, this is the first one which is truly justified."

Almost one year ago, the same disparate groups who supported Saturday's march walked down the same route on the Grands Boulevards in central Paris: the ecologists and the feminists, the Trotskyists and the anarcho-syndicalists, the gays and the anti-fascists, parading under their leftist tribal banners. On that occasion, they were marching, 100,000 strong, on behalf of illegal immigrants. On this occasion, there were far fewer – around 10,000.

In other words, this was no *Germinal*: this was no re-enactment of 1789, nor even of 1968. It was not even a full-dress parade of the forces of the French far left. But it was the largest turn-out so far in support of the five-week-old protest movement for the long-term unemployed which has already shaken and divided the Jospin government. There were modestly supported marches in a score of other cities.

The day was universally reported in the French media as a great success: the unemployed had refused to scatter before the Jospin government's successive salvos of repression, flattery and largess. Beforehand, the government let it be known that it was going to make new concessions this week. In a television appearance on Thursday, Mr Jospin is expected to say that minimum social benefits will be raised next year, with, possibly, a small increase this spring. A week ago he said such increases would explore



the government's entire strategy to boost growth and create jobs by holding down public spending.

Whether or not Mr Jospin will promise enough to calm the protests is unclear. The pressure groups leading the movement are now demanding, in effect, a £37 a week immediate increase in all minimum payments to the long-term unemployed, the disabled, the young and the old. "It is obscene to suggest that people who have to stop eating on the 15th of the month should wait for

increases until 1999," said Richard Dethyre, leader of APEIS, one of the protest groups.

There has been something mysteriously potent and yet insubstantial about the movement from the beginning. It started before Christmas with sit-ins in France's equivalent of dole offices, organised by three far-left pressure groups for the unemployed which had previously expended most of their energy quarrelling with one another. They were helped, in the far north and far south, by the unemployment com-

mittee of the Communist trade union federation, the CGT.

Of the 3 million unemployed and 1 million long-term unemployed, barely more than 2,000 people were involved in the sit-ins before the riot police, the CRS, dislodged them 10 days ago. And yet Lionel Jospin's Socialist-Communist-Green coalition government has been riven by its worst internal crisis since it came to power seven months ago: the public has been instantly and overwhelmingly sympathetic; the

media, left- and right-wing, has been full of the jobless cause.

It is as if the French, for a variety of motives, some from good faith, some from bad faith, have willed the protest to be larger than it is. Political manipulation and posturing, inside and outside the Jospin coalition, account for part of the unexpected potency of the movement. Beyond that, the country seems to be haunted by its own bad social conscience.

We think of France as a country dozing

Fight for jobs: Protesters in Paris clash with police at the close of the march for the unemployed on Saturday

Photograph: Joel Robine/APP

in a warm bath of social protections and benefits. If you are employed – if you are inside the system – there is some truth to the image. But to be unemployed in France, especially unemployed for more than a couple of years, is to fall out of the system and to live miserably.

Unemployment benefit starts generously but diminishes over 30 months (longer if you are 50 years old or more). Once automatic rights expire, a single person receives, at most, £60 a week, a couple £90 a week. One in four of the unemployed – about 750,000 people – receive less than the £75 a week, which is the official poverty line for a single person. (The cost of living is higher in France than in Britain: food is perhaps 20 per cent more expensive.)

If the unemployed movement had been asking for jobs, Mr Jospin could have dealt with it comfortably enough. ("Growth is picking up; we are trying to cut the working week to 35 hours; jobs are on the way.") But the movement is not asking, primarily, for jobs; it is asking the government to bring the long-term jobless inside the system, to give them a permanent political status and tolerable lives.

Any large increase in jobless benefits would destroy the government's strategy, to dash for growth, and into the euro, by squeezing public spending. The strategy runs deeply against the interventionist ideas and prejudices of large sections of the coalition, not just the Communists and Greens, but part of the Socialists themselves. Hence the divisions exposed with in the government. Greens and Communists were taking part in another march – this time against the euro – in Paris yesterday.

Beyond that, the jobless movement has exposed the sham of the French claim to have a "political and social model" which avoids the excesses of Anglo-Saxon liberalism. France has trouble in creating jobs because of the burden of state spending, and state protections for the employed, not the unemployed. If the statutory minimum wage was abolished, if some of the gold-plating was removed from the welfare state, especially the health system, many tens of thousands of jobs might be created. But then, as we have seen before, the streets would genuinely be full of protesters.

PARIS GIVES PROTESTERS A TASTE OF THE GOOD LIFE

A contingent of jobless protesters took Sunday breakfast in a luxurious Left Bank hotel, just hours after dining on oysters and steak at a landmark eatery – meals offered by the establishments and sympathetic clients.

After a march in Paris on

Saturday, about 30 protesters made their way to La Coupole and, after refusing sandwiches in the basement where employees eat, were wined and dined with weekend customers, one of the protesters said. La Coupole also promised 15 jobs.

At midnight, half went on

to the Hotel Lutetia "to sleep in a chic hotel", said Nicolas Chantome, 24, a student supporting the jobless in their quest for increased state aid.

The hotel confirmed that, after negotiations, the protesters were allowed to sleep on sofas in the main lounge

and offered breakfast before leaving at 6:15am.

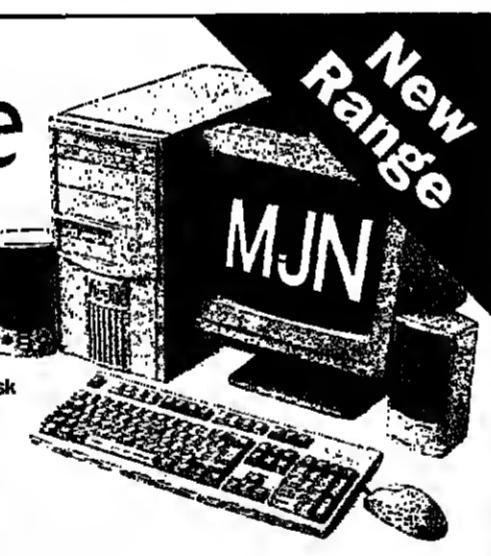
In a statement issued yesterday, the group called on the jobless, students, workers and illegal immigrants to "requisition the riches wherever they are".

— AP, Paris

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11/WORLD NEWS

Human rights and trade top Cook's agenda in Peking

China is sounding friendlier towards Britain than for years, with Hong Kong's transition deemed a success. So Robin Cook, the Foreign Secretary, arrives in the mainland today to a "fresh start". Teresa Poole in Peking says this should make it easier for him to raise human rights issues.

Not for a long time has a visiting British Foreign Secretary arrived in Peking to find what counts in China as a charm offensive. Chinese officials speak of how it is time to draw a line under the "twists" that embittered the Sino-British relationship over Hong Kong, and they welcome the "new initiatives" shown by the British government.

It goes without saying that Peking finds this much easier with a new Labour government, whose ministers had no role in the battles over Chris Patten's governorship of the former colony.

Mr Cook, who arrives in Peking this afternoon, will spend little more than 24 hours in the city before flying on to Hong Kong tomorrow evening. The meetings scheduled with his Chinese counterpart, Qian Qichen, and President Jiang Zemin are supposed to lay the foundations for a "sound and broadly-based relationship", say British officials.

It is Mr Cook's first visit in

the mainland as Foreign Secretary since the return of Hong Kong on 1 July last year. Last week, Margaret Beckett, President of the Board of Trade, arrived in Peking to what the Chinese prime minister, Li Peng, publicly called a "special welcome". Tony Blair is scheduled to visit later this year.

British officials insist Mr Cook will be "pursuing a dialogue on human rights" as well as emphasising a "broad trade agenda". They insist that the question of commerce and hu-

man rights "isn't an 'either/or'" and that Mr Cook is looking for a mixture of "dialogue, discussion, and practical action" on human rights.

With Britain holding the European Union presidency, Mr Cook has already said he would like the EU to adopt a common line on human rights in China. EU countries have to decide whether to back a new resolution condemning China at the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva in March, following the collapse

of a consensus last year [1997] when France and Germany broke ranks. This annual show-down, which has never succeeded against China, is much detested by Peking, and Chinese officials may use this visit to try to convince Mr Cook that it is counterproductive. Last week, in Washington, Mr Cook said the EU and the United States were still undecided over whether to back a new resolution.

China's view that this is the

year for a new start for Sino-British relations may, paradoxically, make Peking's leaders less touchy over Mr Cook's overtures for a human rights dialogue. The Foreign Secretary decided not to meet Wei Jingsheng, the leading Chinese dissident released in November, when he was in London earlier this month, something which will not have gone unnoticed in Peking.

At the moment Britain is stressing practical measures, such as training and educational programmes to improve the "rule of law" in China, includ-

ing bringing Chinese judges to the UK. Political prisoners, who can be sent for three years' "re-education through labour" without so much as a trial, are not the only victims of China's legal system. There is little real justice for ordinary, accused criminals, who are often rounded up during anti-crime "crackdowns" and processed through the courts at alarming speed. Civil and commercial law is equally unpredictable, as foreign companies operating in China have found to their cost.

Floods kill 86 in Kenya

Unseasonal downpours blamed by experts on the El Nino weather phenomenon are hammering Kenya's agriculture and tourism-based economy and striking further blows to the battered infrastructure. Police say floods caused by the heavy rain have killed at least 86 people and caused the worst damage in Kenya's recent history. The *Sunday Standard* newspaper put the toll at 91.

The Kenya Television Network (KTN) said schools around the north-eastern town of Garissa were closed due to floods. The town was running short of food because trucks bringing in stocks were unable to complete the journey, it said.

KTN also showed footage from the Kano plains of western Kenya, where it said floods had forced hundreds of peasants to flee their grass-thatched houses and take refuge in schools and churches.

Police reported more bridges and roads damaged in Meru and other smaller centres in eastern Kenya - which has been worst affected by the torrential rains. They said the damage appeared to be the worst in the country's recent history.

In the capital Nairobi, the Eastlands district where a third of the city's 2 million population live, was without fresh water yesterday after a mains pipe snapped into two, apparently after heavy rains exposed it.

Kenya's vital link road between Nairobi and the port of Mombasa was open yesterday but heavy rains created one of the biggest traffic jams East Africa has ever seen.

— Reuters, Nairobi



Cold comfort: Russian women warm up by a fire after an icy swim in the Victory Park pond in St Petersburg yesterday to mark the Red Army liberation of the city 55 years ago; the swimmers, known as walruses, survived the 900-day German siege in which hundreds died

Photograph: Reuters

Mexicans enraged by massacre claim

Mexican human-rights groups expressed outrage yesterday over a statement by the country's attorney-general suggesting a pre-Christmas massacre of 45 Indian peasants was sparked by a family feud.

The massacre was the result of the systematic violation of human rights" by armed men affiliated with the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), said Maricela Acosta, of the Mexican Commission for the Defence and Promotion of Human Rights. She called for an impartial investigation by the Mexican Supreme Court.

Guerrillas in paramilitary uniform moved into the village of Acteal, in the state of Chiapas, on 22 December, when most menfolk were in the fields, killing 45 people,

mostly women and children. The villagers were known to be sympathisers of Zapatista guerrillas who have been seeking better treatment for Indian peasants in the state. Most of the 50 gunmen arrested were found to be affiliated to the PRI. The local mayor, from the PRI, is under detention for providing the weapons.

Attorney-General Jorge Madrazo, a government appointee, said at the weekend that a father avenging the murder of his son, five days earlier, may have triggered the massacre. "The murder was the last link in a chain of wrongs which the attackers felt they had suffered, including murders, kidnappings, the burning down of homes and threats."

— Phil Davison

Latin America Correspondent

US jail figures up 5 per cent in a year

The United States prison population has increased by nearly 100,000 inmates to more than 1.7 million in the 12 months that ended last 30 June, the Justice Department reported.

The department's Bureau of Justice Statistics said its annual report that the number of prisoners increased by more than 96,000, or nearly 5 per cent, from 1 July 1996 to 30 June 1997.

At the end of June there were nearly 1.1 million state prisoners, more than 560,000 local jail inmates and more than 99,000 federal prisoners. The report said the steepest increase took place in local jails, which held about 9,100 juveniles.

The largest jail population was in Los Angeles County, with 21,900 inmates, followed by New York City with 17,500 inmates and Chicago's Cook County with more than 9,100 inmates.

Since 1990, the number of people in custody has risen by more than 577,100. The report found that one in 155 US residents was behind bars at mid-1997. The trend of more incarcerated criminals began in 1980. The report gave no reason for the increase, but experts have cited a number of factors, including tough new sentencing laws and more drug arrests.

— Reuters, Washington

Russian mine blast kills four

A methane gas explosion at a Russian coal mine in the arctic Vorkuta region killed at least four miners and injured five, while trapping about two dozen others inside the mine, officials said. By evening, hopes of finding the trapped miners alive was diminishing rapidly, the Interfax news agency said, citing local officials.

Russian coal mines, with their aging equipment and deteriorating safety standards, have been plagued by a string of accidents in recent months. In December, 67 miners were killed by a methane gas explosion in a mine in Siberia. Thirteen other miners were killed in separate accidents in 1997.

— AP, Moscow

Diamond town captured

Thousands of people are fleeing the Sierra Leone diamond town of Tongfield after its capture by heavily armed Kamajor hunters in a battle with troops loyal to the military government.

The traditional hunters took the town, a key source of government revenue, on Saturday after a two-week siege. Residents of the town headed for Kenema, the eastern capital, around 12 miles away, according to Diego Thorlaksson, a Red Cross relief co-ordinator. The Kamajor oppose the junta that toppled president Ahmad Tejan Kabbah last May and have launched repeated attacks against the Sierra Leone army and former Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels who rallied to the coup.

— Reuters, Freetown

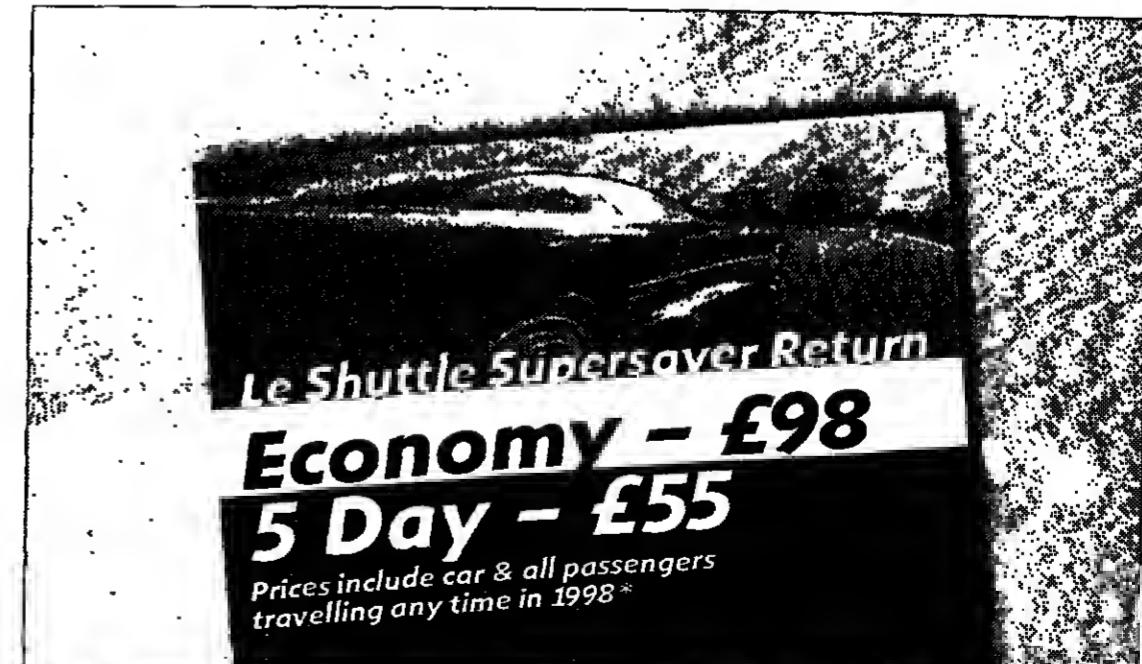
Nephew of King Fahd dies

Prince Abdullah bin Saud bin Abdul-Aziz, a nephew of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, died on Saturday, a Royal Court statement said. He was 65. The statement said Prince Abdullah had suffered for a long time from an incurable illness but did not say what the illness was. The Prince was governor of the holy city of Mecca during the reign of his late father, King Saud, King Fahd's brother, who ruled from 1953 to 1964.

— AP, Riyadh

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Men with our thoughts on their minds

Our minds work the way they do because we have inherited our ancestors' genes, and the brain is an organ designed for computation. Steven Pinker explains his determinist vision to Jerome Burne, while Steven Rose argues that it's all a bit more complicated than that.

At first glance you might place him as a survivor from a Seventies rock band – good features, designer suit and a Roger Daltry-style tumble of dark curls, now streaked with grey. But while the rock dinosaurs have long given up even the pretense of revolution, Steven Pinker has just written a manifesto whose aim is to storm some of the social sciences' most cherished bastions – that our minds are largely shaped by our culture, that parents mould their children's personality, that social factors decide our behaviour, that psychological problems are rooted in childhood. "I suppose I do line them up and mow them down" he says, imitating someone with a machine gun.

Not that he's remotely rabid. He's a psycholinguist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but in another incarnation he might have been a successful analyst or chat-show host. He leans forward and nods encouragingly as you talk, as if to say "I understand what you're saying and it's really interesting".

When it comes to ideas though, he's very clear and utterly ruthless. His book *How the Mind Works* (Allen Lane £25) pulls together a broad sweep of recent research to present an explanation that many find very threatening, or (as Steven Rose argues below) badly misconceived.

Stripped to its barest essentials, his thesis comes in two parts. The first says that our mental life – the way we think, our feelings, our

'What genes determine are thoughts and feelings – not behaviour'

goals, our desires – is shaped by the pressures of evolution, just as much as our hands or our hearts. Our minds work the way they do because those of our ancestors whose minds also worked like that passed their genes on.

The second part is that there is nothing special or magical about the brain. It is an organ designed to do a job, just like the stomach or the lungs.

"Everyone accepts that the job of the heart is to push blood round the body," says Pinker, "and knowing that enables you to understand why it's engineered the way it is. But people still balk at accepting that the brain is an organ designed for computation. Now, that doesn't mean it's a computer. What it does mean, though, is that its job is to work out strategies that boost the chance of survival. These range from navigating around a 3-D world using 2-D information from the retina – an awesome feat



Stephen Pinker: His theory sees our 'mental life' as the legacy of previous generations and redefines the functions of the brain

Photograph: Nicola Kurtz

Why Pinker is wrong: it takes more than dodgy genes to produce a compulsive shopper

by the way – to selecting the mate who gives you the best chance of passing on your genes."

One charge made by his critics is that evolutionary explanations are merely dressed-up "Just So" stories – genes predisposing to homosexuality stay in the population because those with them help to bring up relatives' children. "Good evolutionary explanations make very definite predictions," says Pinker. "I wrote about one that explains sickness during pregnancy.

"It predicts a number of features of morning sickness, such as when it should occur, how long it should last, what effect it should have and so on. All of which turn out to be true. There's also an evolutionary-based theory of short-term memory that successfully predicts data retrieval systems on a computer."

Not surprisingly, given the misuse of theories that explain human nature in terms of their genes, Pinker is frequently accused of promoting a version of genetic determinism, portraying us as the puppets of our genes. "I don't believe genes determine behaviour," he says. "What they do determine is the repertoire of thoughts and feelings that individuals then translate into behaviour, depending on their life history and situation."

"Genes are what evolution works with. If you accept evolution, then adaption must have shaped our brains along with the rest of Nature." All told, a very reasonable revolutionary.

• Steven Pinker and Steven Rose will debate this issue on Wednesday at the Institute of Education, Gordon Square, London WC1. Call 0171-636-1577 for tickets.

Stephen Pinker claims that the mind is a computer-like information processor, built of a series of "modules" for different behaviours, such as language and lying, and that these have become wired into our brains and minds as part of our genetic heritage. I think he's wrong – for reasons I discuss in my book *The Making of Memory and Lifelines*. Let me explain why I think that.

First, minds and brains trade not in dead information, but in living meaning. For Pinker, a footprint in the sand "carries information". Wrong. It is the person viewing the footprint who ascribes meaning to it, derived from our evolutionary, developmental and cultural history. Think of the multiple meanings that viewing a footprint on his island seashore had for Robinson Crusoe.

Second, brains and minds aren't Swiss Army knives equipped with pull-out screwdrivers and bottle-opener modules, pre-formed in our genes; they develop dynamically and coherently as part of the constant interplay of specificity and plasticity that constitutes the living processes that create us. Neither behaviours, nor any other aspect of living systems, are embedded in individual "selfish genes".

Third, minds and brains aren't pre-formed in our genes; they develop dynamically and coherently as part of the constant interplay of specificity and plasticity that constitutes the living processes that create us. Neither behaviours, nor any other aspect of living systems, are embedded in individual "selfish genes".

Fourth, it's not the conductor of the cellular orchestra. Rather, like a well-practised concert quartet, each cellular element interacts harmoniously with all others without the need for a "master molecule".

The idea that our human capacities are frozen into presumed Stone Age habits (so-

called evolutionary psychology, which operates on the Flintstones principle that our ancestors shared the values and practices of American suburbia circa 1950) profoundly misunderstands the ways in which our biology and culture are entangled through evolution and history. Our brains evolved from the same structures that snakes use to analyse odours, but this doesn't mean that we think by smelling.

This is why the idea of "neurogenetic determinism" – which claims that we can trace

'Genetic determinism crudely turns complex social issues into tendencies embedded in the brain and genes'

everything from infanticide through sexual orientation, alcoholism, compulsive shopping, tendency to midlife divorce and street violence to the consequences of some fixed genetic processes – is so misguided.

Such determinism crudely turns complex social processes into "tendencies" embedded in the brain and genes.

suggesting "violence" is to be understood by searching for the "genes which cause aggression" – and presumably treated by selective abortion or genetic engineering.

So why, if it is "in the genes", is homicide so much more common in the US than

in Europe? The 280 million handguns said to be in personal possession would seem a more likely part of the answer than any delving into genetics.

Genes – and computer-fixated thinking about living processes in general, and human behaviour in particular, fundamentally misunderstands the rich interconnectedness of life and the multiple levels at which it must be understood.

What I find very odd about all this maho evolutionary talk is the extent to which, in the last analysis, it wants to have its cake and eat it. Evolutionary psychology argues that we are merely the deterministically driven products of our selfish genes and of their sole interest, replication. All our deepest desires and emotions, our abjectly selfish failures, as well as our most selfless ambitions to create a more beautiful world, are simply shadow-play.

To be sure, even its most vociferous exponents ultimately recoil from this bleak vision, and claim that they are (in some unexplained way) independent of their genes. But where does this autonomy come from?

It is time to go beyond false dichotomies of genes and environments, determinism and free will. We can't choose either our genes or the world we are born into, but it is precisely our genes – as part of the living, dynamic processes in which they are embedded – which enable us to transform that world.

Steven Rose is professor of biology and director of the Brain and Behaviour Research Group at the Open University. "Lifelines" is published by Allen Lane in the UK and Oxford University Press in the United States

TECHNOQUEST

Juicy vitamins/ Killer paint/ Bigger snakes/ Apple pips

Questions for this column can be submitted by email to: sci.net@campus.bt.com

Q How much vitamin C is found in pure orange juice? A litre of orange juice contains about 300 milligrams of vitamin C, which is five times the recommended daily dose for adults.

Q In the film *Goldfinger*, one of the women was painted in a non-porous paint which killed her. Would this really happen? Yes, for several reasons. Firstly, the skin is important for temperature regulation. We sweat constantly; it evaporates and removes heat from our bodies. Blood flowing near to the skin also loses heat as it is cooled by contact with the air. Without these two mechanisms, the body would overheat and we would die. Secondly, the skin can absorb substances applied to it – such as toxins in a non-porous paint. These might be eliminated by the kidneys, or they might kill you. Thirdly, a non-porous paint would mean that the skin's waterproof surface layer would get waterlogged (like wearing a non-absorbent plaster for a while) and so be liable to infection. It might even start to fall apart.

Q Snakes continue to grow, although very slowly, throughout their lives. Did this also apply to dinosaurs? Continual growth occurs in many reptiles, but is particularly noticeable in larger species of chelonians (turtles, tortoises) and crocodilians (crocodiles, alligators and gharials) as well as large lizards (such as monitor lizards). It is one reason why it is so difficult to be certain about the record sizes achieved by these creatures. Microscopic studies on bone from a wide range of dinosaurs indicate that it was probably universal among that group too.

Q Are apple pips poisonous? If so, how dangerous are they? Apple pips actually contain cyanide, and you can be poisoned by them if you eat too many – though it would take about a cupful. You might be sick of apples by then.

Q Why do moths fly towards light? Because they think it's the moon. Moths are used to navigating by the light of the moon – they fly keeping the moon on one side. When a bright, artificial light is present, they try to do the same thing but to keep it in a fixed position they end up flying round in circles. The brightness of the light disorients them and their orbits get smaller and smaller until eventually they hit the light.

Q Where does the word "atom" come from, and who first thought of it? The word atom comes from the Greek for "not cut". The first person to think that atoms existed – that is, that everything was made up of combinations of some indivisible objects – was a man called Democritus who lived in Greece in 400 BC. He thought that atoms were the smallest things that could exist, and this was generally believed until the early part of this century.

You can also visit the technocast World Wide Web site at <http://www.campus.bt.com/CampusWorld/pub/ScienceNet>

Questions and answers provided by Science Line's Dial-a-Scientist on 0345 600444

TELL ME ABOUT ... how we age

From the moment the human sperm mingles with the egg, the cells there can divide 100 times over. But eventually, even if we aren't hit by a bus or fall ill, everyone dies. Last Friday, a team of American scientists announced that they had found a way to make human cells in a test tube divide about another 20 times, the equivalent of living roughly one-fifth longer.

The way they did this was by investigating the telomeres of the cells' DNA. The DNA inside our cell nuclei is arranged in 26 chromosomes, and each chromosome pair has a string of "base pairs" – the "letters" that make up DNA instructions – repeated over and over at their tail end. This is the telomere.

When a cell divides, the telomere shortens by roughly 65 base pairs. Eventually it shortens beyond a certain length. After this, the cell "refuses" to divide again. Instead it undergoes "programmed cell death", or apoptosis, which is the body's way of letting cells die quietly.

But you can make the telomere grow again, by applying an enzyme called telomerase. Our

own bodies generate it to reset the length of the telomere in the cells which become our gametes (sperm or eggs). Thus there is a gene which makes telomerase too.

The American scientists found out how to switch on the telomerase gene in normal cells, the cells kept on dividing, and the telomere didn't shorten.

They described this as the "cellular fountain of eternal youth". But other scientists doubt it. Telomeres do not tell the whole story about ageing. There are many more reasons why we get old, and telomeres aren't involved in all of them.

Nobody is completely sure why we age, though there are plenty of theories. It may be linked to rapidity of cell reproduction – animals with fast metabolism tend to live less long. It is not about size: tortoises can live hundreds of years, whereas a giraffe only lives about 40 years so far.

• Further reading: "Why We Age" by Steven Austad (John Wiley & Sons, £19.99).

The web site <http://www.jhmc.edu/clewis/aging> contains some useful discussions of competing theories.

years longer than other men, but (for obvious reasons) that's not a trait they can pass on to children. Genes which help us reproduce, but make us die early, will always be favoured by evolution over those that make us live longer.

(And simple logic demolishes the idea that telomerase is the secret of eternal life. If it were, then evolution has had plenty of time to produce somebody whose telomere never shortens. That person would be immortal. No immortals are known. QED.)

A more favoured theory of ageing suggests that it occurs because of accumulated damage to the machinery of our cells – especially their powerhouses, the mitochondria – caused by exposure to natural toxins and the effects of generating energy in the cell. That fits best with everything we know so far.

• Further reading: "Why We Age" by Steven Austad (John Wiley & Sons, £19.99).

The web site <http://www.jhmc.edu/clewis/aging> contains some useful discussions of competing theories.

— Charles Arthur



Life begins ... and cells can divide 100 times over

THEORETICALLY ...

HIV vaccine trial/ A new form of ice/ Crystal-clear laptop screens/ Helpful genes

An anti-HIV vaccine has been given approval for large-scale trials involving 7,500 healthy volunteers. The tests, which are the first for an HIV vaccine, will test its effectiveness over three years. The trial was approved by the US Food and Drug Administration, and will cost \$20m (£12.5m), most of which has come from private sources. The vaccine, called gp120, is made by Vax-Gen of San Francisco. It is intended to confer immunity by alerting the body to a single sub-unit protein in the virus – though critics have said the idea is "a total waste of time and money".

Ice-nine was just a plot device for Kurt Vonnegut – remember the novel *Cat's Cradle*, in which the US Army devised a form of ice in which water froze at room temperature, and so destroyed the world? But now scientists at University College,

London, working with a team in Germany, have done something similar, taking the number of known "phases" of ice from 11 to 12. In the latest *Nature* they report that ice-XII seems to consist of "a mixture of five- and seven-ringed water molecules". However, it is only found in conditions of between 0.2 and 0.6 gigapascals – about a thousand times greater than atmospheric pressure – and below -10°C. So the world is safe, for now.

Laptop computer screens of the future could use carbon films with the properties of diamonds, to glow more brightly, reports *New Scientist*. Motorola has found that depositing a very thin carbon film behind the screen leads to energetic electrons being emitted which could make laptop screens appear much more sparkling. The carbon screens are also flat and cheap – and they could be on the market in a couple of years, say the Motorola team.

Genes which don't seem to do anything positive to help an organism may actually confer some tiny advantage which in the long (evolutionary) run makes a difference, according to work by a team at the University of Utah. They took some yeast and made copies with randomly inserted foreign DNA. They then selected these "mutants" to find some which could withstand stressful environments (such as extreme temperatures). Yet when they put the mutants back in competition with the parent yeast, the parents generally survived better. Joe Dickinson, who led the work, reckons that's because genes that survive the long haul of evolution confer a tiny but real competitive edge – even if they don't seem to do anything on their own.

DINAH HALL

13/INTERVIEW



DEBORAH ROSS
TALKS TO
JULIE BURCHILL

I meet Julie Burchill at the Sussex Arts Club, which seems to be Brighton's answer to the Groucho. She comes in with a shopping basket over her arm and a flocked, mustard-coloured head scarf tied tightly under her ample chin. She looks rather like a slatternly Mrs Tiggywinkle after a bad fall on to a squashy lipstick. She is quite fat, yes, "but it's not the food, Deborah. It's the drink". Today, though, she orders just a grapefruit juice. "One without bits in, please," she requests in her strangely peeping, Minnie Mouse-meets-Bluebottle voice. Without bits in? Teeny girl voice? Julie was dazzlingly young - the girl of girls - when she first galloped into our lives as a rock journalist, smelling of danger and wickedness and speed and sex. Absurdly, at 38, I think she may think youth is still her secret.

Whatever, she doesn't smell wicked and wanton any more. Just gorgeous and rich. "You smell gorgeous and rich," I tell her. She peeps, "Thank you," then says she's come here via The Vanity Box, a perfume shop which is "just up the lanes, in the square. You should go and get yourself something nice, Deborah. Tell them you're a friend of Julie's. I spend a bloody fortune there." She has been mad about perfume, she says, ever since she used to try it on in Woolworths as a young girl growing up in Bristol. She always hated Bristol, and Weston-super-Mare down the road. Last year, she went back to Weston-super-Mare and, "wearing diamonds as big as love bites", she anointed herself with Joy ("the costliest scent in the world, Deborah") while riding the rickety land train along the seafront. "To go home in style is the greatest of all," she says.

She is spectacularly hopeless with money. She's earned fortunes - £125,000 a year for such-and-such a newspaper column, £150,000 advance for such-and-such a book - and blown fortunes. "I never look at price labels. Someone once told me it was common. That and sending mixed coloured flowers. I have always lived very high. I was really overdrawn once and needed a watch. I bought a £1,500 Rolex. It didn't occur to me to get an Omega. I am to the Royal Bank of Scotland what The Duchess of York is to Coutts." She lives in a £250,000 house in Brighton with a swimming pool and "pool furniture, Deborah" and a pool boy called Adam who comes fortnightly and says: "Can I have a look at your boiler, Mrs Landesman?" She is often broke, she says, "but I'm never poor". She is into instant gratification in a big way. So what that she's never properly grown up? Good for her! On the other hand, if she doesn't mature soon I think she's pretty much had it.

Julie Burchill was brilliant once, truly rippled surfaces. At 17, she was the most famous rock critic in the land. Then, from the *NME*, she went on to work for *The Face* (where she was styled as Mad, Bad and Dangerous to read) followed by the *Mail on Sunday*, the *Sunday Times*, the *Sunday Express*, where most would agree, she came over less mad, bad and dangerous and more caged beast that had been cynically put on to spice things up a bit.

After two novels - the successful sex 'n' more sex blockbuster, *Ambition*, followed by the more experimental *No Exit*, which bombed spectacularly - she has now written her autobiography, *I Knew It Was Right* (Heinemann, £15.99). This is not her best work by a long chalk. It's tiresomely lazy and bloated and self-regarding. We hear a lot about Julie's "great glittering brain" and "enormous talent". It's full of arrogance without insight. She claims to still write "like an angel on angel dust", which is patently untrue. She takes us back to her childhood by saying: "Scattered clues to my condition seem to glint like lethal, gleaming, gum-cutting coups in the pungent, com-



Don't worry, she might grow out of it

forting Christmas pud of my infancy as I look back in languor." If ever a pud was over-egged, it's this one. Editors have let her get away with it for too long, perhaps. It's a shame and a bit embarrassing. But if someone thinks they're the best, how do you go about telling them they can do better?

On one level she is hugely likeable. She is funny. "Tell me, the women who sleep with Robin Cook, what do they do for fun?" She is recklessly generous. When I confess I've never bought a grown-up perfume, am still a hopeless, foul-smelling, impulse sort of person, she up-ends her shopping basket and insists I have all the perfume samples given to her by The Vanity Box. "Take them! Take them!" She has opinions about everything. Tellytubbies are good. "If you don't like the Tellytubbies, you don't like life." Bridget Jones is not so good. "I hear they're making a film of the diaries. Ohhh,

I can't even imagine what guilt feels like. I'm beginning to think it doesn't even exist'

I'm on the edge of my seat ... will she or won't she have that cake?" Most attractively, she draws you into her own, invented world. Whose career could be saved by Tarantino? Dehli Reynolds? Possibly not. Christopher Biggins? I think no, she thinks yes. "He was actually very good as the randy vicar in *Poldark*," she declares. I say I had my first big crush on Captain Poldark. She looks at me with terrifying disdain, then says: "Well, for those who like that kind of thing, that's the kind of thing that they like."

Yes, she is rather scary. Not because while she was growing up a working-class Stalinist in Bristol I was getting ready for Hitler with Miss Brass over the Golders Green Odeon. Or while she was doing speed and turning down sex with Marlon. I was anxiously waiting for the next installment of *Poldark*. No, she scares me because there is something not quite right about her, as if she is horribly damaged in

some way. She says in her book: "If I am in a position in which I must choose to pursue my own pleasure and thereby break one or more innocent hearts and lives of those close to me, or to forgo that pleasure and keep the hearts and lives of loved ones intact, there simply is no choice. In such a scenario I feel literally no one matters but me." If this is true, just how much of a monster is she?

Certainly, she's lived her life as if it were true. She effectively abandoned Bobby, her first son, when he was five, and didn't see him for years. She left her first husband for her second, then her second for Charlotte Raven, the 27-year-old, dark Mardis beauty who is currently editor of Julie's recently relaunched magazine, *The Modern Review*. While still having an affair with Charlotte, she started sleeping with Charlotte's younger brother, Daniel, 25. "Oh, terribly treacherous, but there you go." Charlotte found out and was not happy, obviously. She and Charlotte had a big bust-up, but are now friends again. "She's terribly dignified and broad-minded." She is still sleeping with Daniel, who lives nearby and "works with old people". She's had three abortions since they first got together. Three? "I thought I was too old to get pregnant." And you thought that three times? "Yeah, must have." Julie, that's just so stupid. Ever heard of contraception? "It's a good day out," she says.

Does she ever feel guilt? She says not. "I can't even imagine what it feels like. I'm beginning to think it doesn't even exist, that it's just a social convention, like putting your hand to your mouth when you cough." Does she ever get hurt? "I don't like it when people say I'm finished. No one likes to hear that. But I don't get stabs of pain. I never get wounded. It's completely outside my experience. Do you?" Yes, I say. "Poor you," she says, with even greater disdain, before adding: "There is a lot to be said for having only a narrow range of emotions." She would like, I think, for me to describe her as the media world's answer to Rose West. Rose West? Possibly. But only in the sense she's buried whatever gift she once had under the patio. Dig it up, Julie, dig it up!

"I don't give a toss about anything," she says. "I'm a psychopath," she boasts. But, that said, she recently fought for the custody of her second son, Jack, now 11, and lost. She was extremely cut up, by all ac-

counts. All she will say is: "It cost me £30,000, I never had a nanny," but there are tears in her eyes.

Her father, whom she has always worshipped, worked in a distillery and was a communist and prominent trade unionist. Her mother made cardboard boxes in a factory. Julie was an only child, probably because she was so weird her parents didn't dare have another one, she says. She was a "prodigy", could read at three, was on to Nabokov and Graham Greene by 12. By that time, she was also "the best shoplifter in my year". The first book she ever lifted was Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, which she thought brilliant. She doesn't rate Greer now, though. "She's full of loathing and envy for young women. Same with Pay Weldon. They're so moushy, always carp about the Spice Girls. Why can't they pass on the baton gracefully?" "Why can't you?" I ask. "Bridget Jones is very popular, you know." "Please, I met Helen Fielding at a party once. She said: 'Julie, my biological clock is really ticking.' So I said to her: 'Well, bloody stop it then, you silly cow.' God, so trivial." What's important, then? "Like Freud said, love and work."

As a child, she seemed to have disciples rather than friends. "While they liked playing Twister and Space Hoppers, I used to make them dress up with me, put on high heels, smoke cigarette sweets and drink red Corona, pretending it was pink champagne." Some might say she still has disciples rather than friends - the younger the better, it seems. Love and work, but better still when they love your work.

She was, she says, a very fearful child. What frightened her? "Everything," she replies. "The sun coming up ... everything." She couldn't leave the house without going through a furniture-touching ritual - "first the sofa then the armchair, then the door handle". It made her feel safe, somehow. She was frightened of her periods, when they began at 13. She wouldn't let anyone know that she'd started. Then, for two years, she took her soiled sanitary towels and locked them in the wardrobe in her bedroom. She kept the key around her neck. When the wardrobe could take no more, she ran away to London. Her parents, aghast by the stench, no doubt, broke the wardrobe open and had, she thinks, a midnight bonfire. She imagines they were "mortified" but doesn't know for

sure because they've never discussed it. Why did she do it? "I was just weird."

Determined to be a writer from the off, at 17 she got a job on the *NME* by responding to an advertisement for "hip young gunslingers". There, she met Tony Parsons, now a *Mirror* columnist, to whom she lost her virginity.

"A nasty, brutish, short shag, as though someone had trodden heavily on my toe," she writes with glee. Still, just after her 18th birthday, she married him. She can't now imagine why. "Maybe it was because I was programmed to marry. Perhaps that was my one streak of conventionality. She ended up pregnant in a flat in Billerica. 'Billerica! I tell you, there wasn't even a cafe on the high street because it was thought that if you wanted a cup of tea, you should bloody well go home and make one.' She rarely went out because, she claims, Tooy wouldn't let her. "I was so clever and fan-

tastically pretty he was scared of me running off with someone else."

She stayed in and did drugs. Speed mostly, everything bar heroin. She doesn't any more, she says. When you're older, you can't take it. She's not an alcoholic, no. "I never drink on my own. Only with friends. Then, the sky's the limit. If you're going to have fun, you might as well have fun." Anyway, Tony's fear was prophetic, because the first time they went out to a party together, when Julie was 24, she met the writer Cosmo Landesman and ran off with him. She's always had a thing about Jews, she says. "They're just so bright and talented and good down there." Yet Julie, you idiole Stalin, who wasn't exactly keen on them. "True. But I still say he was the man for the job at the time." Marriage to Cosmo wasn't as great as she thought it was going to be. The trouble with living with Jews, she says, "is they don't half nag".

Anyway, she told Tony she was going to visit her parents, then never came back. She

left Bobby, then five. "I felt weepy at the station, but then I thought, this is a bit pathetic, like Celia Johnson in *Brief Encounter*. So you put on more lipstick and walk into the sunset. Like all callous people, I can cry very easily, I can cry at Frosty the Snowman, but I don't cry through self-pity."

She didn't see Bobby again until recently, when he suddenly turned up asking if he could live with her. She was thrilled. It hurt Tony enormously, she says. No, Bobby's never asked her why she left him. "And, if he did, I wouldn't answer. I don't take crap from children. You don't do them any favours if you do."

The thing about Julie, I think, is that you have to accept she just is, and that their may be no clues whatsoever glinting from the Christmas pud of her infancy. Some people are just born askew, and she may be one of them. She seems incapable of maintaining friendships. She has spent large chunks of time without her children. She surrounds herself with people who worship her, but never challenge. She thinks as long as you own up to mistreating others, it makes it okay. She would like, I think, to be taken seriously as a kind of contemporary Dorothy Parker, but isn't. There seems to be an emptiness at the heart of her life, just as there is at the heart of her writing. It may be time for her to mature into something else. If she can. Unless she starts owning up to what she feels, I doubt she'll ever mature either as a person, or as a writer. It's just all going to be hollow. Somewhere along the line, I think, she swapped true talent for a controversialistic lie. Perhaps she just got too old and fat and rich and posh-smelling to cut it any more. I hope not, but it's a possibility.

Anyway, she has to go because she has another interview to do, plus she's working on a book about Diana and has to deliver shortly, so needs to get home to write. "You must come to one of my pool parties. Third Sunday of the month throughout the summer," she says, before pointing me in the direction of The Vanity Box. Emboldened, I do go in. I end up with Organdy by Givenchy, the first grown-up perfume I've ever owned, and which, at £28.50, is rather more expensive than Impulse but a step in the right direction, I am assured. So, in short, I come away from Julie feeling happy and smelling divine. Which is more than can be said for most, perhaps.

Machismo versus materialism: the boy hedges his bets



DINAH HALL

Thank you letters are still trickling in from Christmas, giving me a marvellous opportunity to compare composition, syntax and creative genius amongst the nieces and nephews. A spelling mistake from the private school ones can put me in a good mood for the rest of the year. Mindful that the recipients of my children's thank you letters are probably doing the same, I usually stand over them, urging them to more ambitious statements than "it will be useful". This year, however, they dashed them off before I had a chance to doctored the contents. My mother-in-law, Granny

Saying goodbye to his god-

mother at the airport after her annual visit required an even more uncomfortable show of sentiment for the 11-year-old. Should he dodge the kiss and thus deny himself the benefit of future godmotherly largesse, or does he proffer his cheek and sacrifice his machismo on the altar of material goods? In the event, of course, he screwed his eyes tight shut, held his breath and plumped for the latter - he was taking no chances, as his godmother was showing alarming signs of taking the official side of her job too seriously. He had more than once had

to politely turn down her offer to escort him to church, but more worrying than that, she had taken to quoting from some God's Godmother's Guide such truths as "time spent with the godchild is more valuable than any gift". But the ultimate dilemma for the modern boy came when he had to decide whether to accompany me and his patron into the departure hall. I couldn't understand why he was hesitating as his godmother is well known for tipping small boys who carry her bags. Perhaps he wanted to negotiate the rates first? But no, as he shift-

ed uncomfortably from foot to foot, he confessed that he was worried that "people might think he had lesbian mothers". Of course, I told him not to be so silly, and that he must stop looking at life as another episode of *Friends*. Which is ironic really as my friend was meeting up with her estranged husband and his lover at the airport. The lover was a dead-ringer for Roger Whitaker.

With the rest of my children already in possession of knowledge I only acquired in my twenties, it's no wonder I've

STYLE

Our new-look style page, bringing you the best of fashion, architecture and design, will appear on Thursday

Stop this nonsense, Mr Brown, you are not the best leader we never had



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Free us from our cars

Sir: All the signatories of this letter are pensioners and all are very green about the environment. We have listened to more than one discussion about reducing the use of cars in which there has been no mention of the special problems of the elderly. Our cars are our prams. Neither cycling nor walking are alternatives for us.

We cannot reduce the use of cars unless changes are made to meet our circumstances. Three such changes need not be costly to the taxpayer and will also provide new jobs for the less skilled young unemployed.

If we are to use the train instead of our cars, we need porters to help us and our luggage up and down stairs, to and from platforms and on and off trains. We see no difficulty in this being paid for by a ticket bought at the same time as the train ticket – the present charge at Heathrow is £5. We assume this service would be run by Railtrack and suggest that it should be properly salaried with the prospect of promotion within the organisation, that the uniform should be designed to inspire respect, and the job renamed – "rail stewards" perhaps?

If we are to use public transport on the roads, buses must get back their conductors to help us on and off and give security against crime.

Pedestrian areas in cities are fine for the environment but not for the elderly. We need some form of cycle huggy or rickshaw to operate in these areas, limited to holders of cards similar to the orange badge for car drivers. Buggies could be hired out to athletic young people who would be licensed to operate them.

All these proposals would also benefit the disabled and though some outlay by the Government would be needed, the services would be mainly paid for by the users.

Dame ALIX MEYNELL;
Sir HAROLD and ELKE
ATCHERLEY; HADLEY and
HEATHER BUCK; PATRICIA
CLIVE; KATHERINE
COATES; DIANA COLLINS;
ROSEMARY GONDRE;
SUSAN HICKLIN; PAMELA
JOHNSON; JAMES and DITTA
KERR; JACQUELINE and
YOOP KRAMERS; ETHEL
MURRAY; MAUREEN
NEEDHAM; ALEC and
ANGELA STRAHAN; BASIL
and JENNY STREET;
MONICA VINTERS; JOHN
and MARIETTA WHEATON
Lavenham, Suffolk

The partial breakdown in the relationship between the Prime Minister and the Chancellor is serious, and damaging both to the Government and the country. On the face of it, it is so remarkable that Tony Blair should have been forced to rebuke his friend and ally in yesterday's newspapers that it is tempting to believe it must be an optical illusion in the world of smoke, mirrors and spin that is modern high politics. But there can be little doubt that Mr Blair wanted it known that he has lost patience with Gordon Brown's "psychological flaws" and his "daft and ill-advised" venture into vanity publishing to repeat two of the most derogatory phrases attributed yesterday to those speaking on the Prime Minister's behalf.

This is the closest to a public dressing-down that can be administered without actually going public. It followed a pointed reminder to the Cabinet last week of the virtues of unity, and the announcement that Mr Blair would himself take the chair

of a new welfare reform committee, with Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, rather than the Chancellor, filling in his absence.

It says a great deal about the state of the relationship between Nos 10 and 11 Downing Street that Mr Blair should have calculated that it was better to expose division at the heart of government than to allow Mr Brown's blatant self-promotion to go unchallenged.

Arguments over the busy buzzing of Mr Brown's supporters may seem like the small change of politics. Individually, the charges laid against the Chancellor by the Blairites are petty. He allowed a television documentary to be made about his role in Labour's election victory. He let it be known that he regarded himself as prime minister to "president" Blair; while the sweet phrases came from No 10, the serious action came from No 11. And he chose to "co-operate" with Paul Routledge over his biography, which laid bare his con-

tinuing resentment over the Labour leadership contest of 1994.

It was this last that could not be ignored. It does not matter, except as an indicator of his poor grasp of political reality, that Mr Brown thinks he could have beaten Mr Blair in the contest for the Labour leadership, and hence the premiership. What matters is the persistent and public hawking of this belief. The Chancellor claims he did not discuss the leadership contest with Mr Routledge. This is not true. In an interview in the Treasury he uttered these words which, as his biographer noted, said it all: "The newspapers, with a few notable exceptions, did not back me – not least because I was out of fashion. I was never part of the London scene anyway. But that did not in my view mean much, once the campaign started among ordinary Labour Party members and indeed backbench MPs."

By publicly coveting his neighbour's job, and apparently regretting his decision to pull out of the contest four years ago, the

Chancellor puts himself in the wrong. More than simply coveting the premiership, the book makes it clear that Mr Brown still blames Mr Blair's supporters for plotting against him to deny him his rightful reward. Again, it does not matter whether he is right. If Mr Brown thinks that his past resentment is more important than the task in hand, he is a smaller person than he thinks he is.

If the Chancellor really were the figure of stature which Mr Blair has always generously maintained he was, he would have said loudly and often: "Tony Blair is the Prime Minister. I could not have been. We owe the scale of our election victory to him and I will do all I can, publicly and privately, to support him for as long as he wants me to."

The danger in this government was never going to be simply disagreement over policy. The truth is, you could barely persuade a cigarette paper to slide between Messrs Blair and Brown on the issues that

really matter. When the Tory splits stand, it was damaging not just because they disagreed, but because they had grown to dislike and distrust each other, and so could not resolve their disputes.

Both Mr Blair and Mr Brown would like us to believe that their relationship is still strong enough to resolve differences. Indeed, it would have been a lot better for Mr Blair if he had told his advisers to hold their fire this weekend. But the speed with which this crisis has blown up (and we're in no doubt, it is a crisis) does not inspire confidence. Although Mr Blair's irritation should have been kept within his circle, and addressed only to Mr Brown himself, it is not up to the Prime Minister to end this row. Mr Brown needs to give ground, openly and graciously. Above all, he needs to realise that his tactics are counterproductive. Not only are they undermining his prospects of realising the Government's best hopes; his own leadership prospects are weakening by the day.

Smoking in the pub

Sir: I am the landlady of a busy and smoky pub. The idea that smoking can be banned ("Public backing for smoking bans", 13 January) is quite alarming, as I am sure it would be damaging to my trade.

People have a choice whether or not they enter my pub. I make business decisions based on what my customers require. My customers, in the main, wish to smoke and those that don't make the choice to drink with their smoking friends. I do not need people who are not my customers, or for that matter the Government, to tell me what my customers can and cannot do in my pub.

J FRIZZELL
Trimdon Colliery, Co Durham

Late trains

Sir: Your report (16 January) that more trains are running late since privatisation will come as no surprise to those who have to use them. However we are not told is the number of passengers who arrive late.

Trains are officially "late" if they arrive more than five minutes late at their final destination. Trains are often scheduled to have quite leisurely waits at intermediate stations, to allow for lost time. Thus a passenger can well arrive at his station ten minutes late but the train will be within the deadline at the end of its journey, and will not be counted as late.

If a connection is missed because one train is late at an intermediate station, the passenger can well be delayed by an hour or more; yet it is likely that none of the trains involved will be counted as "late". Dr ARTHUR TARRANT
Twickenham, Middlesex

Fear of recession

Sir: Hamish McRae discusses the possibility of a recession. What precautions would he suggest for individuals to take, to minimise harmful effects? If these actions were widely applied, would the overall result be to increase the chance of an early deep recession in the same way that actions in anticipation of a devaluation make it more likely that a large devaluation will soon occur?

GORDON PACKMAN
Glasgow



Fright at the opera

Sir: While the business community would have us believe there is nothing one of their own couldn't run better than the incumbents, Sir Colin Southgate's remarks about opera goers in shorts show the need for tact in a senior public arts role ("New Royal Opera chief aims to keep out the riffraff", 16 January).

Opera audiences are already full of businessmen who care more about their fellow punters than the music, and now it seems opera management is going the same way. People who can afford £25 to watch Arsenal FC may be able to afford opera tickets, and may even smell and wear singlets, shorts and trainers. Most music lovers can't and don't.

The staggering public subsidies provided for opera in the capital should go towards providing a service for the public, not just yawning, coughing expense-account business parties.

Fresh audiences could be just what London's opera needs to dig itself out of its dreadful hole.

TOM PEER
London SW11

Sir: The Royal Opera House has been subsidised for many years, in a largely fruitless bid to make it more accessible to a wider public. However, Sir Colin Southgate clearly dislikes the wider public's dress code. Fair enough then. Sir Colin, how about this? No singlets and smelly shorts, no subsidy. Let's see what will do for the £5m deficit.

Oh, and should I ever go to an Arsenal home game, I must remember to wear black tie. After all, there are standards.

GRAHAM LEACH
Ilford, Essex

Sir: You state (leader, 17 January) that "the core principle, that there should be public subsidy [of the arts] is unassailable".

When I was asked a few weeks ago to give a talk to fi-

nal year arts administration degree students, I found that not one of them could give me a reason as to why the state should subsidise the arts. When those who are responsible for the spending of public money on arts activities have no social or aesthetic rationale for what they do one wonders on what that "core principle" is based.

LUKE DIXON
London W7

Asthmatic houses

Sir: I am surprised not to see discussions in the press on two likely causes of asthma (report, 9 January, letters, 14, 17 January).

One is the excessive use of solvent-based chemical treatments in houses for rising damp. As an architect, I keep coming across situations where surveyors are covering themselves against any claim by saying that chemical treatments may be advisable. This is then changed by ill-informed mortgage lenders into an imperative:

"We will not give you a mortgage unless this treatment is carried out."

This often results in multiple treatments, one each time a property changes hands. The time will come when substantial claims will be made against mortgage lenders for insisting on unnecessary treatments that may have damaged peoples' health.

The second possible cause is the aggressive perfumes that manufacturers of household detergents, cleaners, polishes and so on add to their products in the mistaken belief that we need to be able to smell them to know that they are working. These nasty smells are getting worse all the time as manufacturers constantly tweak their products.

I used to visit a house where a teenager suffered badly from asthma. Every time I crossed the threshold I was met by a strong blast of fabric softener.

PATRICIA A TUTT
Peel, Isle of Man

Pigs with names

Sir: Paul Valley's analysis of the Tamworth Two saga is surely wrong ("How the flying pigs became a crackling good tale", 17 January). The reason why the third, anonymous pig was "processed in the usual way" was not that it didn't have a name but that it didn't escape from the abattoir. Its two companions were given names after, and because, they got away.

In doing so they displayed an ingenuity, courage and lust for life and liberty that came as a bit of a revelation, perhaps, to people who had been encouraged – by the food industry, the scientific community, even the church – to regard farm animals as products.

Perhaps the names they were given were a device to deal with that discovery – not so much a way of saying, "Hey, they're not so different from us," as of saying, "Of course, they're not just ordinary pigs." Otherwise, we might be driven to the

conclusion that all pigs are intelligent, gassy creatures who would much rather we didn't eat them, thank you – and that's a thought that sentimental British carnivores can't handle.

HUW SPANNER
Harrow, Middlesex

Drugs and MEPs

Sir: Your article (16 January) on a European Parliament report on drugs is misleading. A large number of MEPs, including Labour members, had serious reservations about the report, as they do not believe its proposals will help in the fight against drugs. That is why a majority of MEPs from a wide range of political groups and nationalities voted for the report to be sent back to the European Parliament Civil Liberties Committee for further consideration.

WAYNE DAVID MEP
Leader of the European Parliamentary Labour Party
Cardiff

If we could just progress this headline please to impact the reader eyeball to eyeball



MILES
KINGTON

I received a letter the other day from someone I had tentatively agreed to write a piece for, and who now wanted to make the whole thing definite. However, that is not the expression he used, "to make it definite". Nor did he use another expression which I always find odd, "to firm it up". He actually used an expression which I had never heard before. "Please can we now progress the article?"

I did not know that "progress" could be used as a transitive verb, that you could actually "progress" something. And of course you can't. At least you couldn't. But it only takes someone brave enough (or ignorant enough) to ignore the impossibility and actually

DO it, and turn a noun into a verb, and after that it only takes enough people to think it is a useful usage, for it to catch on.

There must have been a time, for instance, when "process" was only a noun. The first time it was used as a verb meaning to put something through a process, lots of people must have shuddered, but now it has become a useful little verb, and if someone says to me that they are going to process my application, I don't flinch. Well, I do, but that's only because I know that any processing of any application takes a long time.

"Process" as a verb I still find hard to take, however. The other day I heard someone on

the radio saying that it was always very helpful for immigrants when they came to a new country if they could "access" the language of the host culture, and I still cannot see why "access" is better than "talk" or "understand". It's lazy computer jargon, I'm afraid.

I also dread the phrase "to impact on", which only means "to affect". And I still worry about the word "source", which seems to be a useless alternative to "get" or "obtain". "How do you source your ingredients?" is surely no better than, "Where do you get your supplies from?" and twice as pretentious. Not long ago on *The Food Programme* on Radio 4 I heard someone – not I hope, the great Derek Cooper – asking a chef:

"How do you source your ingredients?" and it didn't seem to occur to anyone on the programme that all the audience must have heard it as, "How do you source your ingredients?"

Well, we all have our hate phrases. Gillian Reynolds wrote the other day, after listening to a discussion on the Millennium Dome, the so-called "People's Dome", that the phrase that made her gorge rise was not anything to do with Millennium or Dome but any phrase beginning with "people's" – "People's Princess", "people's choice" and so on. Paul Dickson actually took the trouble to write down in 1983 a whole list of clichés and clapped-out phrases which bothered him, and the horrify-

ing thing is that most of them are still current. Bill Bryson is not the first American to be funny and to write books about language: Paul Dickson has been doing it for years. In 1983 Arena Books published a paperback of his called *Words* which just listed lots of his favourite words. One chapter, for instance, was a list of expressions for being drunk: 2,331 of them, in fact. The first man who ever listed words for being drunk was Benjamin Franklin, says Dickson, and he managed 228 in 1733, so we have progressed since then in some ways.

Paul Dickson actually took the trouble to write down in 1983 a whole list of clichés and clapped-out phrases which bothered him, and the horrify-

ing list of "buzzwords" which have lost their glitter", clichés which have gone beyond the point of usefulness. Here is a short selection made by me, not at random, but on purpose to show that it takes a long time for buzzwords to vanish after their sell-by date.

"Absolutely, at this point in time, back burner, ball-park figure, hit the bullet, bottom line, can of worms, communicate, community, craft (noun & verb), decasualise, disadvantaged, eyeball to eyeball, feed-back, first the good news..., free lunch, fully cognisant, game plan, go for it, hang a left, humongous, impact (as a verb), input, interface, low profile, matrix, meaningful dialogue, modular, ongoing, outreach,

overview, peer group, piece of the action, prior to, role model, seminal, task force, touch base with, within the context of..."

Now, I am not saying that none of these expressions is useful, though I cannot imagine myself wanting to use any of them. What I would maintain, along with Dickson, is that they are all worn-smooth clichés. And what is horrifying is that he made this list in 1982, when the book first appeared in America. Yes, 16 years ago these expressions all seemed hackneyed and they are still as common as cold germs. If the test of a culture is to come up with new clichés, then we are performing very badly.

ever had

Not quite A Wonderful Life, but a whole lot better



POLLY
TOYNBEE
IN PRAISE OF
CREDIT UNIONS

For all too many families this is the darkest month, the month of reckoning. The Teletubbies and the Spice dolls have been bought and discarded by now, but the bills linger on and on. For poor families, Christmas is a calamity that can sink their shaky finances. Whatever sacrifice it takes, however poor they are, the one badge of clinging to mainstream life is for their children to have a Christmas more like that of their richer classmates, far beyond the means of a penurious life on Income Support.

The debts start to mount now exponentially. Providential Financial, one of the main door-to-door small loans companies, charges an annual interest rate of some 164 per cent. (If debtors had bank accounts, a bank loan would cost around 15 per cent.) Loan company interest charges often far exceed the original sum by the time (if ever) they are paid off. Nigel Griffiths, the consumer affairs minister, has said that he will do something about the loan companies' habit of raising interest rates when debtors fall into arrears. That would help, but there is something the Government should do urgently that would transform the finances of the poor and the prosperity of whole poor communities: Labour should sow the seed-corn to set up a nationwide network of credit unions.

Credit unions are small co-operatives, starting with as few as 20 people, mainly run by volunteers, with virtually no overheads, which take in very small savings and lend out money on low interest rates, never exceeding 12.6 per cent a year. Anyone who can manage to save a minimum of £5 a month for at least 13 weeks is then entitled to draw out a loan, if the committee running the credit union deems them credit-worthy enough. Many people have no collateral, and it works on trust and community. Astonishingly, credit unions have only 1 per cent bad debts, although they may lend to people with nothing. Those falling behind are summoned before the committee to plead their case, and have their problem sorted out.

What bank offers the community service of the credit union in Lewisham? A grandmother came knocking on the door of one of the committee members at 10pm on Christmas Eve desperately needing to withdraw £50 of her credit union savings, and he advanced her the money there and then. Imagine he was James Stewart, and anyone who this Christmas wept over the re-released *It's a Wonderful Life* will understand what this is all about: little people banding together to fight off the depredations of the ruthless big financial institutions.

Take another typical Lewisham example. One man saved for four years and came to the union to take out his savings to pay a £400 car repair bill. The credit union suggested

that, instead, he should take out a loan and pay it back over a year, so he would still have his £400 plus interest at the end. The loan for a year cost him just £26.75.

Imagine if every single small community had its own credit union, a network of people's banks. The money comes in and often goes out to local community enterprises, helping to create employment as the bank grows. It is a highly effective way of creating a sense of community, since it is run by local amateurs with a bit of training, and reaches out to draw local people together. It was, of course, from these small mutual beginnings that the building societies began, now alas mainly converted into ordinary commercial banks, with surprisingly little complaint at this destruction of the mutual idea.

There are around 200,000 members of Britain's existing 645 credit unions – not many considering the need. Some are large employed credit unions, run for those working in local authorities, trade unions, British Airways, British Aerospace; there is even one for employees of Lloyds Bank. Many are run within schools for the local community, open to pupils and parents. Some are run by pupils learning vital skills, such as a group of primary pupils at the John Randall School in Telford who collect up to £100 a week from other children. Even the smallest 20-person credit union is rigorously supervised by a government agency, scrutinising their accounts every month.

The launch of the Government's over-hyped ISA savings scheme was more razzmatazz than substance. No one has the slightest idea whence they plucked the figure of six million expected new poor savers. There is nothing very special about ISAs, except for the fact that savings can be paid in at supermarket check-outs. The real and sensible purpose was to dismantle Peps and Tessas that did less to help the poor and a great deal for the rich. The populist hit was just an excuse. After all, who are all these people who don't save, now, but would? There's been no shortage of people keen to take in savings. The poor non-savers are those who need credit unions, so that they can borrow in a crisis without falling into the hands of loan sharks.

If the Government really cares about the poor, then credit unions are what they should go for. Britain is far behind other countries in their development. American law has encouraged their growth by forcing banks to set one up in their wake every time they close a branch. In Britain, banks are closing branches everywhere, and many outgoing housing estates have never had access to one. A similar law here would have made a crucial difference over the past decade. Ireland has a mass of credit unions, holding £2bn assets; Britain's hold only £100m.

The start-up costs for even the smallest credit union are around £4,000, covering the training of volunteers by ABCU, the association of credit unions. Leaflets have to be printed to draw in a community, local advertising bought and contracts printed for every loan and transaction. So far funds to set them up have come from urban regeneration money or from European social funds and sometimes from local authorities who are allowed to start them. It is a one-off set-up charge, with no danger the credit union will ever come back cap-in-hand for more, and extraordinarily good social value for money. Now is the time of year for the Government to organise start-up money to local authorities and Citizens Advice Bureaux.

Anyone interested in starting a credit union should call ABCU on 0161 832 3694

An episode of low farce – and the highest tribute to American justice



JOHN
CARLIN
ON THE PAULA
JONES CASE

As we chorle at the predication of the commander-in-chief of the mightiest nation on earth, as we snicker over his "distinguishing characteristics", as we gasp at the impudence of his twitish accuser and the quirky little gang of fame-seeking charlatans who spurn her on, let us also – without risk of contradiction – take off our hats and marvel. Let us raise a glass to the land of opportunity, the home of individual rights.

For while, yes, Paula Jones' sexual harassment suit against Bill Clinton is indisputably an episode of low farce, an inglorious moment in the history of the US presidency, it is no less indisputable that it marks a high point in the evolution of American democracy, that it represents a triumph of the rule of law.

For six hours on Saturday President Clinton sat at one end of a long table in the conference room of his attorney's Washington office. He was flanked, on one side, by Ms Jones and her six lawyers, on the other side by a smaller team of lawyers representing him. The session was behind closed doors and a judicial gag-order forbids any of the parties present from disclosing the exchanges that took place. We do know for sure, however, that Ms Jones' lawyers asked the President point-blank whether during his tenure as Governor of Arkansas, on the afternoon of 8 May 1991, he invited their client to a hotel room, lowered his trousers, exposed his erect member and asked her to kiss it. We can also confidently surmise that he was interrogated at length about his legendary sexual indiscretions, and questioned in particular about whether he had ever abused his position as Governor and boss about the financial crisis in the Far East and sat down to examine the draft of his State of the Union address. That is just a week away.

Fully cognisant of the possibility that the President might have all this and more on his plate, the Supreme Court ruled last May against a motion by Mr Clinton's lawyers calling for a special exemption. Mr Clinton wanted the Paula Jones trial to be deferred until after the end of his presidential term. The Supreme Court said that no American citizen, no matter how exalted, was above the law.

At the far end of the room, directly opposite the President, a video camera recorded the inquisition – the first time ever that a sitting President of the United States had given sworn testimony as a defendant in a legal proceeding. Testimony



Trailer-trash turned Avon lady manqué, face to face with the big banana



Photography: Reuters

that may be used in evidence against him when the case goes to trial on 27 May.

Crazily, even as the President was undergoing this extraordinary ordeal, the world was reverberating to the news from Baghdad that Saddam Hussein was once again rattling the sabre of war. This week Benjamin Netanyahu and Yasser Arafat visit Washington in yet another attempt to defuse the looming catastrophe in the Middle East. Immediately upon his return to the White House on Saturday afternoon the President conferred with his chief of staff about the financial crisis in the Far East and sat down to examine the draft of his State of the Union address. That is just a week away.

Fully cognisant of the possibility that the President might have all this and more on his plate, the Supreme Court ruled last May against a motion by Mr Clinton's lawyers calling for a special exemption. Mr Clinton wanted the Paula Jones trial to be deferred until after the end of his presidential term. The Supreme Court said that no American citizen, no matter how exalted, was above the law.

And thus it came about that on Saturday morning, as Ms Jones prepared to face down the President for the first time since allegedly saying to him seven years ago, "I'm not that kind of girl," she hit upon the heart of the matter when she declared: "I feel so proud to be an American, to know that this judicial system works, to know

that a little girl from Arkansas is equal to the President of the United States."

George Washington might be turning in his grave but, on reflection, he would have to recognise, however grudgingly, the exemplary justness of the principle Ms Jones is upholding. The fact that she did not actually utter those words herself is another matter, one that draws attention to the tawdriness of this particular exercise in defence of freedom and the rights of man and woman. The quote was attributed to her in a press interview by Susan Carpenter-McMillan, a peroxide blonde of indeterminate age from Southern California who has seized on the opportunity to savour her 15 minutes of fame by appointing herself Mrs Jones' publicist, fashion counsellor and Svengali.

It is tempting to speculate

that if Ms Jones is prepared to consort with such crass merchants of hubris then perhaps she is, as her detractors in the Clinton camp say, a gold-digging floozy whose whole case against the President rests on a dubious and infantile lie – like those children who somehow invent amazingly lurid tales of sexual abuse by their foster parents, without quite grasping what the consequences of their accusations will be.

But that will be for the courts to decide. What is true beyond reasonable doubt is that the adventures of Paula Jones offer an unlikely illustration of the chief reason why America is the economic powerhouse of the planet. Where America is way ahead of the Europeans and everyone else is in the scope it provides its citizens to get ahead in life. Paula Jones was born in rural Arkansas 31 years ago into a poor Bible-bashing household where television was prohibited, where miscreant children were disciplined with "a good whupping", where the family's clothes were hand-made by her mother out of scraps of fabric her father brought home from the factory where he worked.

This weekend, Ms Jones flew her hairdresser, Mr DiCrisco, from Los Angeles to Washington for the big day. No one can deny, no matter how distasteful her methods might have been, that she has come a long way.

More important, the failure of the President of the United States to escape the full force of the law, against his deepest wishes and those of his unfortunate wife and daughter, sets an example to the rest of the world, to tyrannies and democracies alike. Once the laughter has subsided, we might all fruitfully pause in wonder for a moment of sober thought.

COULD
YOU BE A
MORE
INSPIRING
LEADER?

Good leaders must weigh up all the facts quickly. Make important decisions, then communicate them clearly and precisely.

They have to lead by example, never asking people to do things they wouldn't do themselves. They must command both the trust and the respect of their troops.

If you think that you have these qualities, then don't write to the editor write to us.

What's in the Dome? A solution to the Mandelson problem, maybe



THOMAS
SUTCLIFFE
MILLENNIUM
POLITICS

We are already aware that the Millennium Dome will be capacious. Every schoolboy knows (provided he can actually read) that you could fit Nelson's Column under the Teflon canopy and surround it with four Albert Halls. But an equally pertinent question would be: "Is it big enough to contain Peter Mandelson's ambitions?" And, from his perspective at least, the answer seems to be a decided "yes". The Minister without Portfolio has taken possession of the scheme. He reportedly refers to it casually as "my Dome" and far from maintaining a cautious distance between himself and

a project which could easily bite the hand that feeds it, he has repeatedly jumped the safety moat. If all does go wrong it will be virtually impossible for him to claim that he wasn't at the heart of the failure. And this needs explanation, surely. It may be that his admiration for his grandfather (who master-minded the Festival of Britain) has added an emotional allure to this task but there must be more to it than that.

We shouldn't rule out the possibility, first of all, that the possession has worked in the other direction entirely – that Mr Mandelson has succumbed to building fever, a delirium caused by the intoxicating fumes that rise from architectural models. It is an occupational hazard for architects, naturally, most of whom live their lives in a haze of never-to-be-realised magnificence. But architects are inured to the effects by repeated exposure. They are far better able to maintain some notion of reality in order to survive the inevitable disappointments.

Outsiders often have weaker heads. When I worked at the BBC, for example, it was widely believed that the career advancement of Dick Francis, then head of radio, had been finally derailed after his seduction by a Norman Foster

design for a new Broadcasting House. This was to occupy the site of the old Langham Hotel and it would have been a wonder – responding to but not overwhelming "All Souls opposite, providing a "diagonal processional gallery" from Cavendish Square through to the flagship of public service broadcasting. Norman Foster came in to address staff about its potential glories, which included glass-walled recording studios to reveal broadcasters to their public and a U-shaped lift, which would carry workers between any floor of the old building and any level of the new. Such a lift had never been built before and seemed to some of us a slightly over-engineered substitute for the zebra crossing which had given years of maintenance-free service, but it was all part of the fantasy of advancement and achievement such endeavours generate, the bliss of tangible progress.

You can see that the Greenwich site is heady stuff this respect. From toxic dereliction to wonder of the world in just a few short years; if it works it will be the make-over of the decade and it will reflect on its begetter a glow of mastery and control. Those who wonder why an able politician should pour all his energies into the



All eyes on you know who Justin Sutcliffe

errection of a glorified big top have to take account of the fact that the big top might be seen by Mr Mandelson to contain the one thing which he conspicuously lacks – public acclaim and even (let us dream a little along with him) public affection. (I don't want to be casually snooty about the Dome, incidentally.)

But it is worth remembering, too, that questions change their meaning depending on who is asking them. Imagine that same initial query put by Tony Blair, for example. It would, I think, sound a good deal more calculated and strategic and it is difficult to believe that Mr Mandelson has not taken that into account. In *The Prince* Machiavelli refers at one point to the admirable utility of the French parliament in insulating the king from public hatred. "From this," he writes, "we may draw an important conclusion: that princes should entrust unpopular measures to others, and reserve popular ones for themselves". On the face of it, though, Tony Blair seems to have done precisely the opposite – he has taken on the task of pushing through welfare reform, a potentially explosive task, while his trusted lieutenant is made Minister for Bread and Circuses. Never mind that the Dome is turning out to be a singularly unpopular project (a contempt

reinforced almost daily by co-medians, for whom its hulk and vacuity make it an unmissable target) that couldn't necessarily have been foreseen at the time when Mr Mandelson was given his job. But when you think about it the Dome took a sizeable stone out of Tony Blair's shoe. The Prime Minister's gifts of incredulity are considerable – as demonstrated by his ingenuous shock when anyone questions his good intentions – but even he must have recognised that the nation did not love Tony Blair as he did, never mind his colleagues in the Labour Party. And once the task of election was over it was difficult to see to what task Mr Mandelson could be applied without generating a persistent screech of internal friction. The job of supervising the Dome, safely beyond the pale of government policy, and ambiguously poised between reward and exile, could hardly be bettered as a solution. Mr Mandelson's friends can present it as a great opportunity, fraught with dangers that only amplify the eventual achievement, while his enemies can relish the diet of scepticism and contempt he will be obliged to consume for the next two years. It may well be staggeringly expensive, then, but in one respect at least, the Dome is already fulfilling its function.

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Why Ofex and AIM are heading in the right direction

WEEK AHEAD



DEREK PAIN

Shares indices, for whatever reason, have an unfortunate tendency to give the wrong impression. The Stock Exchange admitted as much when it adjusted, some might say rigged, the New Year's Eve Footsie calculation by changing the closing prices of 11 blue chips.

I suspect Theresa Wallis, responsible for running the Alternative Investment Market, would dearly love the opportunity to tinker with the FTSE AIM index, which allegedly plots the direction of the junior market. AIM has come in for rough criticism, much of it unjustified. As a market specialising in small, start-up, entrepreneurial companies it was bound to have a succession of thrills and spills.

But since it was launched in the summer of 1995 only two constituents have gone bust. Mind you, a few have skidded and slipped and may not es-

cape the corporate grave yard much longer. But for a wealth warning market, which has had more than 350 companies and claims a capitalisation of £5.4bn, the array of casualties is surprisingly light.

True, profit warnings have taken the shine off quite a few constituents. Even so, they live to fight another day.

The FTSE AIM index does not help to allay the more critical perception of the market, showing shares tumbling along uncomfortably near their lowest level since the first calculation. Yet the AIM contingent shares, on average, have increased in value by 17 per cent since their flotation. So why does the index mirror such a miserable display?

It's down to the way it is calculated. When the bigger and perhaps more successful AIM companies, such as high-flying pub chain SFI, graduate to the

main market they are immediately stripped from the calculation with no backward adjustments. So, short of many of the stars, the remaining index constituents are left to give an inaccurate illustration of just how the market has behaved.

AIM also suffers from rather thinly spread research. Still, efforts are being made to increase coverage. For example, stockbroker Durfater has started a monthly bulletin. In its first issue editor Drew Edmonstone comments: "The AIM market is by no means perfect; it is still evolving but major progress has been achieved in a relatively short period of time."

He adds: "As with any new financial market, AIM has had a few teething problems. Those have mostly been centred around the areas of perceived inadequate adviser due diligence, inaccurate illustrative profit projections; poor stock

liquidity; limited market/company research."

AIM is not surprisingly with its bedrock of small companies, has only moderate appeal for institutional investors, who have found to their cost it is often difficult to extricate themselves from small company investments.

Institutions have, on average, 22 per cent of AIM companies;

perhaps, more significantly, they have provided around 60 per cent of the £1.6bn of the new capital raised on the market.

Institutional support is more evident in the bigger companies and the long established groups which switched from the old matched bargains 4.2 market.

Jennings Brothers, the Cockermouth, Cumbria, brewer, is an example. It has four institutions with more than 3 per cent of its capital. Biggest stake, 9.75 per cent, is held by Mercury Asset Management, now part of Merrill Lynch.

All told, 64 former 4.2 companies took AIM. Others went to the more lightly regulated Ofex market, while others decided to exist in what is a share wilderness with the occasional stockbroker, or the company itself, providing a market.

Genus, a cattle breeding and agricultural consultancy

group, used to handle deals in its own shares. But with 30,000 shareholders it found the task too daunting and moved on to the fringe Ofex market last month. Dealings started at 110p; the price is now 140p, giving a £32m capitalisation.

Ofex is run by a Stock Exchange member firm JP Jenkins. It has nearly 200 companies giving a valuation of £2.45bn. However, two of them, National Car Parks, which owns the Green Flag vehicle repair and recovery operation, and Wecatbars, the family-run breakfast cereals business, are worth nearly £1bn.

Ofex has had its casualties. Four have gone bust and question marks hover over a few more. Its disasters include Display IT, once more than 800p, and Woodstock, a pub group which went belly up only months after raising £600,000. The outlook for

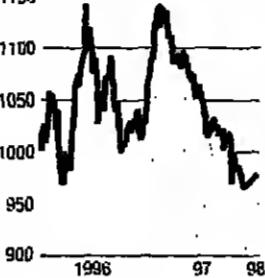
Skynet, once 275p, is bleak.

Ms Wallis at AIM and John Jenkins, the man behind Ofex, have felt obliged to tighten their rules since the inception of the markets. Both stress that regulation must be a continuing process. But at the end of the day their powers are limited – in the case of companies it is suspension, then expulsion. Advisers are perhaps more vulnerable. AIM companies must have a nominated adviser as well as a stockbroker, although often it is the same firm performing both functions.

There is, I believe, little doubt the markets have become an essential part of the investment scene and perform valuable capital raising functions as well as providing expansion opportunities. By their very nature AIM and Ofex will suffer more disasters but that should not be allowed to overshadow their undoubted success.

FTSE AIM index

January 1996=1000



Share Price Data

Prices are in sterling except where stated. The yield is the latest twelve months' declared gross dividend as a percentage of the share price. The price/earnings (PE) ratio is the share price divided by last year's earnings per share, excluding extraordinary items but including exceptional.

City Prices are Bloomberg Generics. Other details: Ex rights x Ex dividend; D suspended; P partly paid; up NP Paid; A annual.

Source: Bloomberg

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Oil Integrated

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Asian flu threatens high street banks as debts are revealed

British high street banks' exposure to the troubled South-east Asian region runs into billions of pounds, according to a leading investment bank. As Lea Paterson reports, the Asian crisis could spell an end to the current bull run in European bank stocks.

Barclays Bank and NatWest Bank each have an estimated £1.2bn exposure to Korea, Indonesia and Thailand, while Lloyds Bank has an £800m exposure, according to an analyst's note published last week.

Stock markets have concentrated so far on the impact of the crisis on American banks and those with strong Far Eastern links, like HSBC Holdings and Standard Chartered. But Britain's high street banks are also embroiled in the region, according to John Leonard, banking analyst at Salomon Smith Barney, the US investment bank.

In recent months UK-based bank stocks have soared on the back of restructuring and consolidation within the industry. But, as stock market awareness

of banks' exposure to the region increases, investors should be prepared for "Asian flu" to spread throughout the European banking sector, according to Mr Leonard.

The analyst said: "Exposure to Asia is quite broadly spread across the industry. But the degree of reaction in the market is at variance with the degree of the exposure".

Salomon Smith Barney estimate the total exposure of leading British banks to Korea and Indonesia to total \$9.9bn (£6bn). Mr Leonard believes banking exposure to Thailand to be roughly similar to that of Indonesia, taking British banking exposure in the three countries to almost \$14bn.

To date, most European banks have failed to provide details of their exposure to troubled South-east Asia.

"Estimating the potential provision exposure of individual banks remains an art, given limited disclosure of both the total amount and the composition of outstanding credits," said Salomon Smith Barney.

The magnitude of the exposure to Korea and Indonesia alone could lead the British banks to post 1997 provisions of up to £100m, according to the Salomon Smith Barney note.

All the large British banks are scheduled to report 1997 profits within the coming weeks.

Bad loans are just one of a number of implications of the Far Eastern crisis for the financial health of the European banks. Banks should also be braced for a sharp downturn in profitability in their Far Eastern investment and wholesale banking activities.

Salomon Smith Barney said: "There is little question that securities market volumes and fees from this region will decline sharply in 1998; managing costs down as rapidly seems impossible."

A handful of leading banks – mostly in the US – have admitted the Asian crisis has hit investment banking profits. These include Chase Manhattan, which made a trading loss of \$160m (£94m) in October because of volatility in the emerging markets.

A wave of consolidation helped European bank shares to outperform the market for much of 1997 and to number among brokers' top tips for 1998.

But prospects for the banking sector began to sour last week as Moody's, the influential US credit ratings agency, announced it could downgrade a number of European banks because of their exposure to South-east Asia.

With the exception of HSBC and Standard Chartered, which both have strong links to the troubled region, British bank shares have so far emerged relatively unscathed.

Provisions for the Asian crisis

should be able to be contained easily within the current earnings of European banks. Barclays made a profit of over £2bn in 1996. NatWest earned more than £1bn in profit.



Children queue for food handouts in Indonesia, where price rises sparked riots yesterday. Photograph: Dylan Martinez/Reuters

Harrison tipped for role at DMG

Bill Harrison, who recently resigned as the chief executive of BZW, is set to head up Deutsche Bank in London as the German institution merges its own commercial banking operations with those of its investment banking arm, Deutsche Morgan Grenfell. The new strategy could be announced as soon as this week.

While Mr Harrison's appointment has yet to be confirmed, the template for Deutsche Bank's reorganisation is largely agreed: the Morgan Grenfell name will be scrapped, and the investment banking side will be combined with commercial banking, centred in London; to form a wholesale banking operation on the same lines as JP Morgan.

Mr Harrison is likely to be paid less at Deutsche than at BZW, where he got £2.85m in his last full year. Mr Harrison, nicknamed "Atlas the Brum", is also unlikely to get much of a payout from BZW, according to observers, since he resigned.

Michael Dobson, the current chief executive of Deutsche Morgan Grenfell, will remain a member of the 10-strong Vorstand, the council which runs Deutsche Bank globally. While his new role has not yet been confirmed, Mr Dobson is likely to help merge Morgan Grenfell Asset Management (MGAM), the business which fell victim to the Peter Young affair and the departure of Nicola Horlick, with Deutsche's own retail asset management arm.

Mr Dobson was given the mandate by Deutsche to build a world-wide investment bank centred on Morgan Grenfell in London, and may still continue with a group-wide role.

– John Willcock

Optimism increases for Far Eastern markets

Analysts were yesterday cautiously optimistic about the embattled south-east Asian stock markets, as last week's Far East rally renewed hopes that the worst could be over.

But it was not all good news in the region. Indonesia continued to reel from weekend riots prompted by the economic turmoil. And, in Japan, the corporate racketeering scandal re-erupted with arrests at Nomura Securities, Japan's largest brokerage.

Analysts predicted the Tokyo stock market would today pick up the pace set on Friday, when the Nikkei surged 6 per cent to close just above 16,000, and were also optimistic about prospects for the rest of the region.

"The Nikkei average will move well

above the 16,000 level but it will not go straight to 17,000," said Tetsuya Ishii, strategist at Okasan Securities.

Kim Dae-jung, the president-elect in South Korea, was yesterday among the optimists in south-east Asia. He received a standing ovation as he vowed to lead Korea out of the financial crisis.

The president-elect said: "Trust me, I am ready to take on the problem. At first I was overwhelmed but now I feel I can do it." Last month he voiced serious concerns about his country's prospects only days after being elected.

But analysts were yesterday careful to inject a note of caution into their forecasts.

"The [Malaysian ringgit] currency has yet to show signs of really stabilising," said

Ken Loo, head of research at Amstel Securities in Kuala Lumpur.

This cautionary note was echoed in Singapore, where Lee Hsien Loong, the deputy prime minister, warned yesterday that the forthcoming Singaporean budget would be tight.

Meanwhile in Japan, the corporate racketeering scandal re-emerged, with the arrests yesterday of two former executives of Nomura Securities and a government finance official. The three are charged with bribery.

Japanese press reported at the weekend that Nomura, which has only just re-commenced trading after a five-month ban for its involvement in the racketeering scandal, would today post its first ever quarterly loss.

– Lea Paterson

Seagram in talks with Allied over spirits merger

Allied Domecq is holding merger talks with Seagram, the Canadian leisure giant, along with some of the world's largest spirits companies. Andrew Yates reports on the group's attempts to form a powerful drinks cocktail and take on the might of the newly merged Guinness and Grand Metropolitan Group.

City observers believe that Allied is most likely to strike a deal with Seagram to create the biggest spirits business in the world with sales of more than £4bn a year. Goldman Sachs, the US investment bank who has been appointed to advise on Allied's options, has placed Seagram at the top of the list of potential partners. However, the group is understood to be holding talks with other big names in the industry including Bacardi-Martini, Pernod-Ricard, Brown-Forman and American Brands to create a world-beating drinks Goliath. All these groups have brands that Allied would dearly love to get hold of.

One analyst said: "At this stage you can't exclude any of the big players in the market, although Seagram is an early front-runner. It has the best match of brands with Allied."

Allied has come under pressure to do a deal after Guinness and Grand Met announced its intention to merge last May, to form Diageo.

Goldman Sachs is understood to be pushing Allied to seal a partnership as soon as possible. However, a deal is unlikely to be concluded in the immediate future. Sources suggest Allied is determined not to rush things and has no set timetable for the conclusion of talks. The City would like to see Allied sort out a deal within the next six months as Diageo begins to exert its huge market power.

Allied is the second-biggest spirits group in the world ahead of Seagram, which is number three in the market. A spirits merger would bring together a vast array of brands, including Teachers and Ballantine's whisky, Courvoisier cognac and Beefeater gin from Allied and Seagram's Chivas Regal whisky, Martell cognac and Mumm champagne. At the moment the two groups are planning a complete merger of their spirits businesses, although they could consider just combining distribution networks.

However Seagram and Allied have ruled out a full merger. Seagram's entertainment business which includes Universal Studios in Hollywood sits uneasily with Allied's pub and retail interests which range from the Firkin chain to Dunkin' Donuts. Allied has annual spirit sales of £2.5bn compared with Seagram's £1.6bn, which means Allied would probably take a majority stake in the combined business that could eventually be demerged and floated on the Stock Exchange.

If Allied manages to form a partnership, it is likely to spark another wave of consolidation in the drinks industry.

House of Fraser plans £300m expansion

House of Fraser is planning to open another 30 department stores as part of an ambitious £300m expansion plan, in a move designed to seal the recovery of the up-market department store operator after years in the doldrums.

The group has recently contacted property agents around the country to find a host of new sites for its opening programme. It already plans to open three stores over the next few years, including sites in Reading, Solihull and a large store at Bluewater Park, a huge new shopping centre complex soon to open near the proposed Channel Tunnel link. It has also identified another 27 towns and cities where it would like a presence.

These include Oxford, Cambridge, York and Chester, where HoF believes the relatively affluent residents will support a new department store. The group is also keen to build its market in the South-east, particularly in East Anglia and Essex. HoF is even contemplating a come-back in several towns where it was forced to leave due to poor trading, such as Newcastle.

Analysts estimate that each new store could cost around £10m to build, meaning that the HoF is likely to spend at least £300m on new stores. Its total expenditure will be much higher than this as it has also embarked on a wide-ranging refurbishment programme designed to turn around ailing stores.

The new stores will be called House of Fraser rather than its other trading names, such as Armitage Shanks, D.H. Evans and Barkers, which are deemed less likely to succeed.

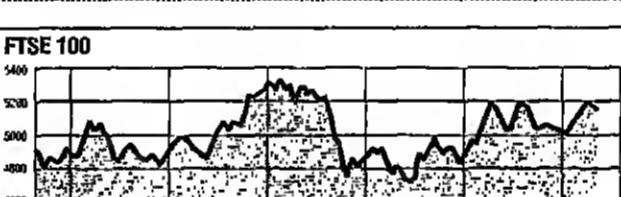
John Coleman, chief executive of HoF said: "I am very positive about the group's future and this is an exciting programme. We have found the stores we want to keep from our existing portfolio and now are in expansion mode."

It is the heyday HoF had more than 100 stores but it has now scaled back to half that number.

However, investors' fears resurfaced last week due to disappointing sales last autumn and in the run up to Christmas, which saw the shares fall more than 14 per cent in two days.

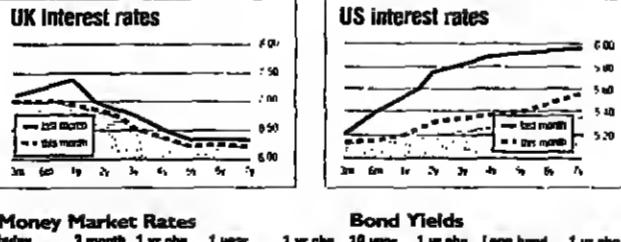
– Andrew Yates

STOCK MARKETS



Indices	Close	Wk's chg	Wk's chg %	52 wk high	52 wk low	Yield (%)
FTSE 100	5263.10	124.80	2.43	5367.3	4153.2	3.4
FTSE 250	4812.60	-52.00	-1.07	4963.8	4384.2	3.279
FTSE 350	2521.90	43.70	1.76	2570.5	2063.7	3.377
FTSE All Share	2461.58	40.43	1.67	2507.68	2055.17	3.356
FTSE Small Cap	2356.00	7.80	0.33	2407.4	2182.1	3.047
FTSE Hedging	1281.00	7.10	0.56	1346.5	1225.2	3.319
FTSE AIM	977.90	-11.50	-1.16	1138	905.9	1.182
Dow Jones	7753.55	173.13	2.28	8289.03	6356.78	1.77
Nikkei	16046.45	1051.35	7.01	20910.79	14486.21	0.95
Hang Seng	8900.04	5.40	0.06	16820.31	7909.13	4.766
Dax	4184.46	-52.48	-1.24	4595.95	2970.45	1.763

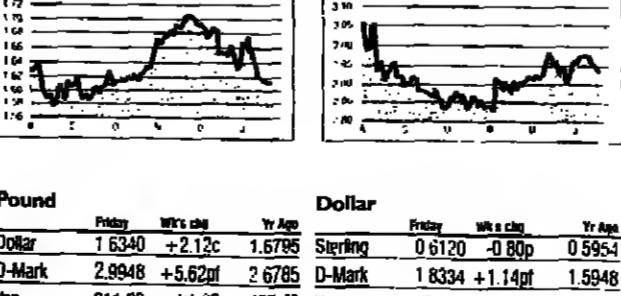
INTEREST RATES



MAIN PRICE CHANGES

Rises	Price (p)	Wk's chg	% chg	Falls	Price (p)	Wk's chg	% chg
Telewest Com	80	12.68	16.80	Amstrad	442	-63	-14.22
Vodafone Gro	483	34	7.18	BICC	144	-13.5	-14.79
Danke Bus Syst	289	8	11.58	McKeechne	395.5	-43.5	-14.76
Centrica	106.5	+1.5	1.11	Oizora	498	-1	-14.14

CURRENCIES



OTHER INDICATORS

Close	Wk's chg	Yr Ago	Index	Chg	Yr-Ago	Close	Wk's chg	Yr Ago	Index	Chg	Yr-Ago
Brent Oil (\$)	14.71	-0.14	23.34	-0.05	0.954	DGP					

Harrison
tipped
for role
at DMG



GAVYN
DAVIES
ON THE
IMF'S ROLE
IN THE
ASIAN
CRISIS

The case for international rescue packages

A few years ago, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had become a rather obscure institution, focusing mainly on bail-out programmes for impoverished African countries, and wondering whether it would ever again find a use for the massive funds at its disposal. The opening of global capital markets meant that private sector banks and securities firms were increasingly providing the balance of payments financing which had previously been the preserve of the IMF. And the "vigilantes" of the international bond markets were even usurping the IMF's traditional role as the chief policy disciplinarian in the global economy.

Then along came the Mexican crisis in December 1994, described rather ominously at the time by the IMF's managing director, Michel Camdessus, as "the first financial crisis of the 21st century". Three years later, with "21st Century" crises prematurely savaging Thailand, Korea and Indonesia, the IMF has suddenly become the most important economic institution on the world stage.

Fame never comes without a price. In this case, the price has been an eruption of strident criticism from politicians and academics about the way the IMF conducts its business. It has been denounced as an undemocratic institution, obsessed with secrecy. And it is variously accused of inappropriately bailing out private sector banks, of imposing needless recessions on Asian economies, and of giving a helping hand to precisely those industrial competitors which most threaten jobs in the West.

Naturally, not all of these criticisms can be valid at the same time. The easiest to dispose of is the last, which emanates pri-

marily from the protectionist wing of the Democratic Party in the US. It is certainly wrong to suggest that the IMF rescue packages in Asia will cause higher unemployment in Europe or America. In the absence of these programmes, Asia would have fallen into an even deeper recession, and its currencies would have become even more undervalued against both the dollar and European exchange rates. For all these reasons, the immediate threat to Western jobs would have been much more severe in the absence of IMF packages.

Furthermore, in the longer-term, it is quite wrong to suggest that a healthy and thriving Asian economy need imply that Europe and America will suffer accordingly. In fact, the opposite will be true – in an open trading system, all sides will make gains in their potential GDP from rapid expansion in trade flows. The idea that Asian success must equate with failure in the West is just crass.

What about the question of bailing out Western and Asian banks? It is clear that by providing necessary liquidity in foreign exchange markets, the IMF has reduced bankruptcy risks within Asia, thereby protecting the shareholders of many Western banks. US Republicans are up in arms about this, arguing not only that public money has been used to protect these banks from the consequences of their own foolishness, but also that this will increase their propensity to burn money in the future. Robert Rubin's 1995 Mexican rescue package, which looked so successful at the time, is now castigated for

encouraging Western banks to take reckless risks in Asia two years later.

This problem, known to economists as "moral hazard", is a real one. However, many of the Asian banks and corporations whose bankruptcy has been prevented by the IMF were viable institutions facing severe liquidity crises, not solvency crises. It was certainly appropriate to rescue such institutions.

Furthermore, when Western governments looked "over the brink" at the possibility of sovereign defaults in Asia, they very rapidly concluded that the risks to the world's financial system, especially the payment system, were too great to contemplate. No one should be in any doubt that the decision to disperse more IMF money to Asian governments in recent weeks has been taken not out of any sense of global altruism, but out of a strong sense of self interest by Western governments.

It is therefore difficult to sympathise with people who have argued that the IMF should have "kept its nose out of Asia". In fact, a more important concern is that the IMF may be forced to stay away from

similar situations in future, simply because it does not have the resources to discharge its role. In the wake of recent Asian packages, Goldman Sachs reckons that the IMF now has only \$45bn of resources available for use on new situations.

Since no prudent institution can go right to the wire and use up all of its money, the margin available to handle new crises is becoming worryingly slim. In the next couple of weeks, both Robert Rubin and President Clinton will argue strongly that Congress should approve new financing tranches for the IMF, but there is a significant risk that these pleas will fall on deaf ears. This would be a worrying mistake.

Finally, what about the recent criticisms (notably from Jeffrey Sachs of Harvard University) about the nature of the IMF conditions imposed on Asian governments? Essentially, the main thrust of Sachs' argument is that the tightening in fiscal and monetary policy required by the IMF packages was entirely inappropriate for the Asian economies. The genesis of the Asian currency crisis had nothing to do with excessive budget deficits or profligate

growth in the monetary aggregates, but stemmed instead from massive private sector capital inflows leading to a bubble in domestic asset prices.

The real problem, according to Sachs, was a collapse in market confidence – a problem which could be made worse by a tightening in macro-economic policy. Higher interest rates, for example, will make asset price deflation worse.

Given that most Asian governments have achieved

continuous budget surpluses over the 1990s, Sachs clearly has a point. The IMF programmes have variously required fiscal tightenings of around 1.5 to 3 per cent of GDP, figures that will be extremely difficult to achieve given the collapse in the economic growth which is now under way. Asia 1998 is not Latin America 1982, and in this new situation it might have been better for the IMF programmes to have required little or no fiscal tightening.

In fact, there is a clear need to use the healthy state of public sector balance sheets to absorb some of the debt of Asian financial systems, thus allowing banking sectors to support a resumption of growth at the earliest possible date. Contrary to the requirements of IMF Lenders of Intent, this means that budget deficits may need to rise for a while.

However, as Stanley Fischer of the IMF has argued, there is clearly also an offsetting issue of policy credibility which cannot be ignored. If monetary policy is not held reasonably tight in the aftermath of massive exchange rate shocks, there is obviously a risk that the collapse in currencies could become self-feeding. Not only might this cause hyper-inflation, but it would further increase bankruptcy risks in the financial sector, by inflating the domestic currency value of foreign debt. This would make recessions worse, not better.

There is necessarily a balance to be struck here. Sachs is probably right to argue that budget balances should be higher than the IMF is permitting. But Fischer is right that higher interest rates may be needed to prevent further currency collapses. Expansionary budgetary policy, combined with contractionary monetary policy, may be the best way out of this mess.

IN BRIEF

Diageo plans shake-up for its London offices

Diageo, the food and drinks giant formed by the recent merger of Guinness and Grand Met, is undertaking a large shake-up of its property portfolio in London. The company says it will sell its offices in Portman Square, in the heart of London, as well as the lease on offices in Hammersmith, west London. Instead, it has bought the lease on a development in Wimpole Street in the capital's West End. "We hope to complete the various transactions this coming week. We have agreed terms with the owners of the lease – Morgan Stanley – and hope to be formalising this week," a company spokesman said yesterday. Analysts expect the company to net around £20m from the deals. The new office will become the headquarters of UDV, the group's spirits division. As for the old offices, the spokesman added: "We can't sell until we move the staff out, some time in the summer. The building is not yet for sale so it can't have a price tag on it."

UK targeted for takeovers

The UK is close to overtaking the US as the world's favourite takeover target for international companies, according to a survey by KPMG Corporate Finance. The surge is due to overseas companies positioning themselves for European monetary union, according to KPMG. Acquisitions of UK businesses by foreign companies reached a record last year of \$53bn (£32bn). This is up over a third from the \$39bn recorded in 1996 and \$36bn last year. By contrast, takeovers by foreign companies in the US fell to just under \$60bn in 1997, down by nearly a fifth on 1996. This represents the first fall in foreign investment into the US since 1992, according to KPMG.

Bargain hunters pick Asia

1997 was a record year for mergers and acquisitions activity in emerging markets, according to research by Flemings, with total deals worth \$74bn. Over \$18bn of this came from multinationals buying into Asia, a region which attracted many bargain hunters as its financial crisis worsened towards the end of 1997. Globally there was more M&A activity in 1997 than in the previous two years combined, and the value of deals nearly doubled in the second half of 1997 compared with the first half.

Drive-Thru ATMs on trial

Britain's first "Drive-Thru" cash dispenser will be installed by Barclays Bank at Hatton Cross for a six-month trial starting at Easter. It will allow customers to draw cash, check their account balance and request statements, without leaving their cars. Barclays says that Drive Thru machines offer increased safety and convenience, especially for parents with young children and in bad weather. They are common in North America but Hatton Cross will be the first in Britain. Customers of Barclays, Lloyds TSB, Bank of Scotland and Royal Bank of Scotland will be able to use the machine free of charge. Other cardholders will pay a small charge.

Sales up at New Look

New Look, the women's wear retailer, reported strong but spread-out Christmas trading yesterday. Total sales for the seven-week period ending 10 January 1998 were up 21 per cent on the previous year, and increased by 10 per cent on a like-for-like basis. Tony Collyer, New Look's finance director, said: "Trading went well in early December, then a lot of people waited for the sales after Christmas, where they got a lot of good bargains. It's a very competitive market at the moment, with a slight trend towards more luxury garments."

New director for Waterfall

Peter Hilliar, an ex-BZW and NatWest leisure analyst, has joined snooker-hall company Waterfall Holdings as a non-executive director. Mr Hilliar, 57, joins the AIM-quoted company from Hudson Sandler, the City PR firm.

IT suppliers set to profit from Grid for Learning plans

Information technology suppliers look to be in for a bumper year selling computers and software to schools, as extra funding from the Government fuels a headlong rush to introduce computers into the classroom

The bonanza will kick off next month when the Govern-

ment announces which schools will share £100m to buy equipment to connect to the National Grid for Learning, the internet-based network which is supposed to link together all the schools in the country by 2002.

According to RM, the educational software and hardware

supplier, schools spend just £150m a year on IT equipment. Even if some of the £100m displaces existing spending, the market will grow dramatically.

At the moment 6,000 of the country's 32,000 schools are connected to the internet. However, most use dial-up access

from a dedicated computer, which makes it hard to integrate with classroom teaching. The next step is to connect a school's network to the internet, allowing access from any computer.

The switch will be spurred on by new deals from telecoms suppliers. Both British Telecom

and the cable companies are offering high-speed ISDN links to schools for under £1,000 a year.

The lack of computer literacy among teachers has also prompted Education Secretary David Blunkett to unveil a £235m package, to be drawn from National Lottery funds, to

provide IT training for them.

Capita, the outsourcing group, and schools operator, Nord Anglia, are keen to supply the training. But they will have to wait for legislation clearing Government to allocate lottery funds.

– Peter Thal Lansen

Small firms get task force against skill shortages

A task force of leaders has been set up by the British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) to deal with the widespread skills shortages that are said to be binding small firms' competitiveness.

The move comes as the organisation, which claims to represent 11,000 business of all types and sizes, published research indicating the problem is as serious as ever.

The survey conducted with Alex Lawrie, a finance company that is part of the Lloyds TSB group, found that nearly a third of firms believe they are being held back by "inadequate levels of skills in both sales and management staff". Computing and other information technology skills shortages remain particularly acute, with firms claiming particular problems with managerial and clerical staff.

In addition to being worried about the effect of such shortages on rising wages, business owners echo other industrialists in expressing concern about the ability of the education system to meet their needs. More than 60 per cent of the 343 firms surveyed believe that school leavers lack basic writing skills, while 38 per cent feel the same about graduates. More than half were also critical of graduates' understanding of the business world.

The survey also found that, while take-up of such formal initiatives as National Vocational Qualifications and Investors in People is generally low, most small firms provide training – largely through on-the-job and specific short courses.

The BCC action comes as Barclays makes another attempt to persuade small business owners of the benefits of obtaining professional advice with two new guides, *Getting the Best from you Business - Adviser and Developing Relationships with Businesses*.

Both are aimed at improving understanding between business managers and their advisers of their respective needs and priorities

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Charities race to lure sponsored marathon runners



Steve Cram:
Hosting the
Macmillan Cancer
Relief pasta party
following the
London Marathon
(right)

Main photograph:
David Ashdown



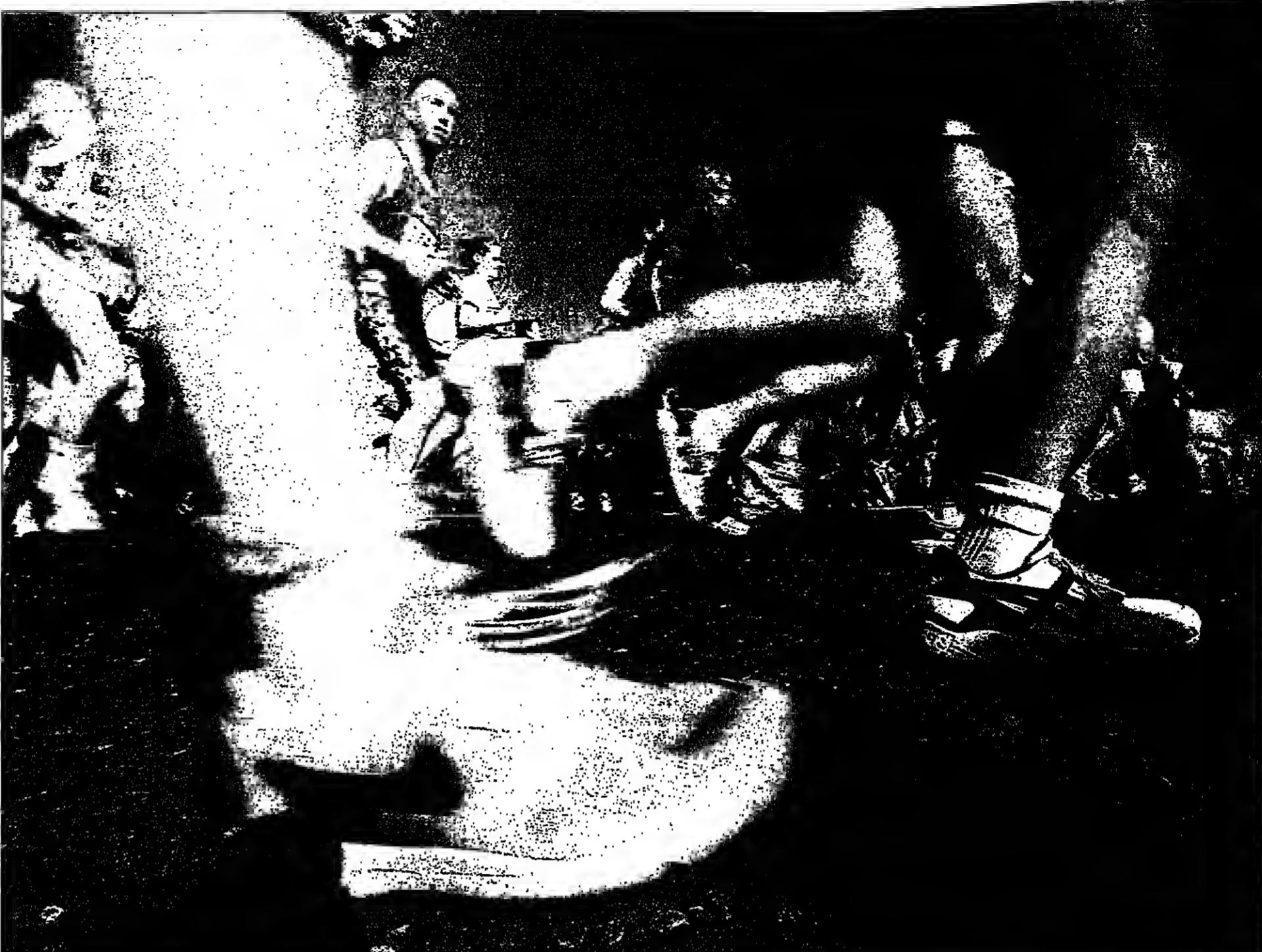
Daley Thompson:
Backing Barnardos



Liz McColgan:
Supporting the
Starlight children's
charity



Seb Coe:
Promoting the
Royal National
Institute for the
Blind



For many charities the Flora London Marathon is now the biggest fundraising event of the year. Ian Burnell reveals that this year charities are offering exotic holidays, trips on Concorde and free gifts as inducements to runners to wear their vests.

With the chance to fly anywhere in the United States, while the British Heart Foundation guarantees its top fundraisers a place in the New York City marathon.

Other charities directly link prizes to the amount raised by the runner. Muscular Dystrophy will give a free mountain bike or sports camera to those raising more than £1,000, with free running shoes for competitors generating £500 or more. The Royal National Institute for the Blind offers a free CD player for those who raise £1,000 and a trip to Paris on Eurostar for the top fundraiser.

But some of the poorer charities are being left behind. Shelter, the charity for the homeless, tells competitors: "No holidays to South America, no free weekend at a health spa, no colour TV ... but what we can offer is hope."

Fiona Head, the charity's fundraising officer, said: "It has become very competitive because we are all trying to get a slice of the cake. We can't afford to offer major prizes and it's going to be very difficult for

some of the smaller charities to keep up." Headway, the charity for people with head injuries, admitted: "It's hard for us to compete because we just haven't got the resources."

The competition has been made even more intense this year by the presence of the Diana, Princess of Wales, Memorial Fund, which is hoping to field a team of 1,000 runners. The Diana fund and Age Concern are the official charities for the 1998 marathon.

Some charities are using celebrity supporters to persuade marathon runners to join their cause.

Steve Cram is hosting the Macmillan Cancer Relief post-race pasta party, while Daley Thompson is backing Barnardos, and Sebastian Coe is supporting the Royal National Institute for the Blind. Former marathon winner Liz McColgan backs the Starlight children's charity.

Meanwhile Scope, which gives its runners the chance of winning a year's free membership of a health spa, also offers them a pair of running shoes

signed by the star athlete Denise Lewis.

Stephen Lee, director of the Institute for Charity Fundraising Managers, said charities must be careful to remain within the law. "If a charity is paying for inducements it may be engaging in trading activities rather than fundraising activities, which is against the law for a charity," he said.

Mr Lee pointed out that the fierce competition was indicative of how important the marathon had become to charities.

"Last year the marathon raised some £1m for charity. It is a very significant event and is up there with Children in Need and Comic Relief in its importance to this sector," he said.

Nick Bitel, chief executive of the London Marathon, said: "This year we confidently expect to raise more than £1.5m which is more than any other one-day event."

"The prizes that are offered help to incentivise fundraising but I don't think they make people switch from one charity to

another. The best fundraisers per head are usually running for some of the smallest charities."

Some 80 per cent of British runners in the marathon will be raising money for charity. In most foreign marathons, the charity fundraisers number only a handful.

"The charity work and the

fancy dress is a very British thing," said Mr Bitel. "It makes the London Marathon this strange mix of wonderful sporting event and great community occasion at the same time."

The marathon organisers are told to "focus on board rooms and managers with access to media outlets.

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